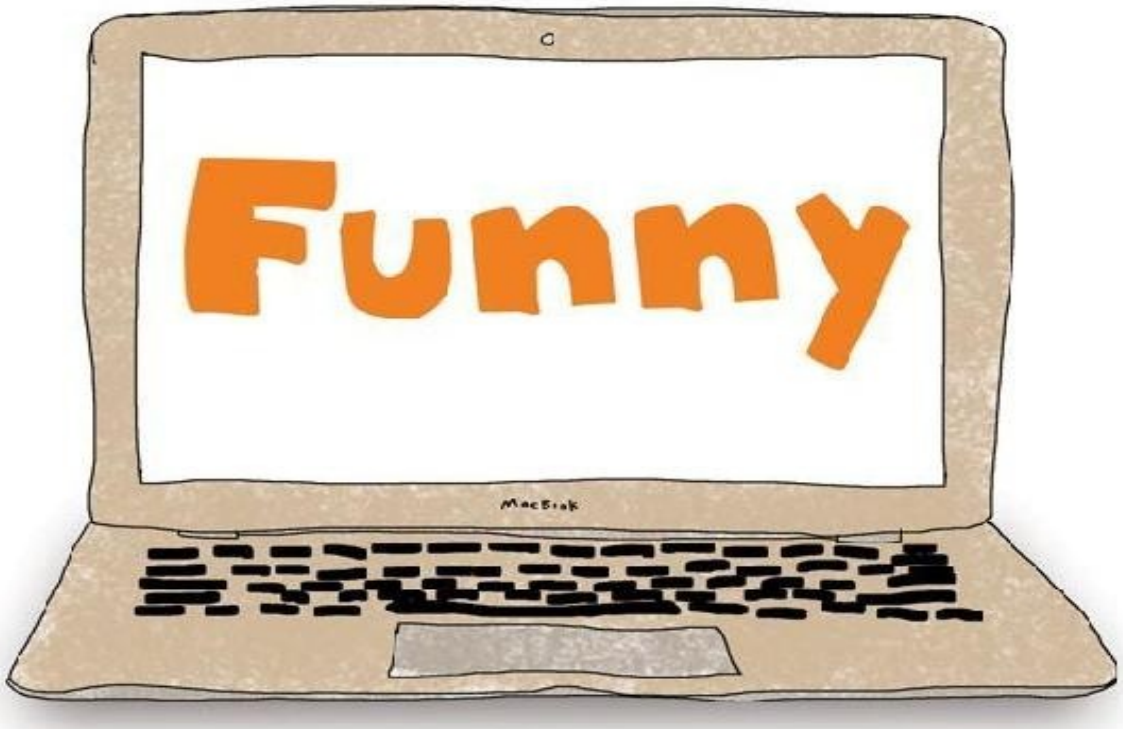
HOW TO WRITE



YOUR SERIOUS, STEP-BY-STEP BLUEPRINT FOR CREATING
INCREDIBLY, IRRESISTIBLY, SUCCESSFULLY
HILARIOUS WRITING

SCOTT DIKKERS

HOW TO WRITE FUNNY

Your Serious, Step-By-Step Blueprint For Creating Incredibly, Irresistibly, Successfully Hilarious Writing

Scott Dikkers

Copyright © 2014 by Scott Dikkers. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the author except in the case of a brief excerpts in the context of a review. For information write Scott Dikkers / 4044 N Lincoln Ave., #223 / Chicago, Illinois 60618.

ISBN-13: 978-1499196122

ISBN-10: 1499196121

For everyone who's put up with me

TABLEOF CONTENTS

1 : INTRODUCTION
Use the techniques in this book to reliably create top-notch humor writing
2 : YOUR BRAIN'S COMEDY ENGINE
Access both hemispheres of your brain to eliminate writer's block and tap an endless reserve of comedy ideas
3 : THE HUMOR WRITER'S BIGGEST PROBLEM
Overcome this one devastating obstacle to reach the widest possible audience
4 : HOW TO GET LAUGHS
Understand the different kinds of laughs, and how to generate the best one
5 : SUBTEXT: THE MAGIC INGREDIENT
Infuse your humor with this vital component to create writing that makes people laugh

6 : THE 11 FUNNY FILTERS
Create any joke using the 11 fundamental building blocks of humor
Funny Filter 1: Irony
Funny Filter 2: Character
Funny Filter 3: Shock
Funny Filter 4: Hyperbole
Funny Filter 5: Wordplay
Funny Filter 6: Reference
Funny Filter 7: Madcap
Funny Filter 8: Parody
Funny Filter 9: Analogy
Funny Filter 10: Misplaced Focus
Funny Filter 11: Metahumor

7 : USING THE FUNNY FILTERS
Layer the building blocks to create increasingly hilarious jokes
Method 1: Filtering
Method 2: Finessing
Method 3: Divining

8 : PROCESS OVERVIEW
Master this simple system to become a prolific humor writer

1: INTRODUCTION

“A friend once asked me what comedy was. That floored me. What is comedy? I don’t know. Does anybody? Can you define it? All I know is that I learned how to get laughs, and that’s all I know about it. You have to learn what people will laugh at, then proceed accordingly.”

— Stan Laurel

When you get pulled into a good piece of humor writing, something magical happens. The string of words in front of you ignite a spark that sends outlandish images and funny ideas racing into your brain like a lit fuse, culminating in an explosion of laughter.

Most of us don’t have a clue what’s making us laugh, exactly. We don’t have the words to articulate it. “I don’t know—I just thought it was funny,” we say.

Maybe it’s the headline, or the tone, or a great joke in the first few lines. Maybe it’s the crazy characters or escalating absurdity, or the way the writer strings it all together to make you see the world or yourself with a skewed perspective that you’ve never experienced before.

Whatever it is, when you put down that story, lean back in your chair and wipe away the tears of laughter, one thing is certain. You’ve just enjoyed a rare treat: the polished work of a master humor writer.

There aren’t many great humor writers in the world. You could probably count the ones who’ve made you laugh out loud on one hand. There haven’t even been that many throughout history. It’s a one-in-a-million writer who can elicit sustained, hardy laughs from total strangers with nothing more than words on a page.

Why is that? Why are there so few writers who can do this? I’ll tell you why. Because writing humor that’s funny—really, gut-busting funny—is one of the most difficult and challenging of all the literary crafts.

Other genres of writing, by comparison, are easy.

A horror story, for example, is extremely easy. You could probably write a pretty good one over a weekend, like Stephen King frequently does. Vampires, ghosts, blood, screaming, and a slew of other pre-vetted, inherently spooky clichés are sitting on the horror tool shelf waiting to be dusted off whenever a writer needs to drum up a scare.

A story that’s a good cry is easy, too. Write about a pet dog or a beloved horse that dies, or a couple who splits up, or a kid yanked from his mother’s arms. Separate some characters who are meant to be together, or kill them off before their time, when others are depending on them. Writing a story that makes

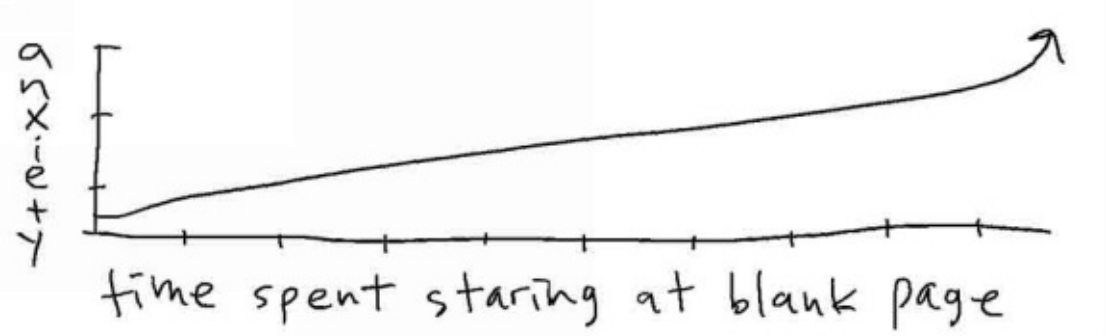
readers cry is like pushing a button.

But what if you want to make readers laugh?

Maybe you can re-tell that great joke you heard the other day. No, wait, you can't do that—that would be stealing.

Maybe you can tell a story from your life that you found hilarious. But, on second thought, most people probably won't find that funny. It's one of those "you had to be there" situations. Most funny stories from life are like that.

In fact, all the go-to funny ideas you can think of have been done to death: banana-peel slipping, mothers-in-law, three somethings walk into a bar.... How do you think of something new that's funny? How do you create laughs out of thin air—and somehow transfer them perfectly onto a blank page?



We can scarcely explain why we laugh at funny writing. How can we possibly be expected to create it?

Where do we even start?

We start here.

To paraphrase E. B. White, comedy is like a frog—once you start dissecting it, it's not funny. And dissecting comedy and the comedy-writing process is exactly what we're going to do in this book.

So, get out your scalpel. In order to figure out how to write funny, we have to take it apart, analyze it, and learn how to put it back together.

It's not going to be an easy task. It may not even be funny. But rest assured, the end result will be you getting a lot better at writing things that make people laugh.

WHAT IS FUNNY?

To begin to understand how to make people laugh, we first have to ask, what is laughter, how does it work, and what makes people do it?

Peter McGraw is a professor of marketing and psychology at the University of Colorado Boulder. He believes he's discovered the unified field theory of humor. He can explain what's funny with a simple vein diagram showing how a "benign

violation” is always funny.

Comedy teacher and Hollywood script doctor Steve Kaplan believes he’s reduced the definition of all comedy down to one sentence that screenwriters and performers can use to generate laughs in movies or TV shows: an ill-equipped relatable character who faces impossible odds yet doesn’t give up.

Psychologists have a lot of theories as to why people laugh: it’s a gesture of submission in a complex interpersonal dynamic; it’s the result of a positive state; it’s the brain processing an error in stimuli: or any number of other nuanced, involuntary, intellectual or social responses.

The ideas of these modern experts, as well as those of the philosophers and thinkers who’ve braved this topic throughout the eons, all provide some insight into what makes people laugh. But such intellectual humor analysis usually attempts to define only things that are funny in two areas: real life and performance.

The question for us is, How do you *write* something funny? In writing, there’s no funny performer or engaging personality to “sell” the humor. This salesperson is a critical tool almost all media of humor take advantage of. People like people. They like watching funny people perform for them. They like when Uncle Bob tells one of his great yarns, or when their favorite celebrity comedian comes out with a new movie or a new bit.

When audiences read something funny, there’s nobody there. There’s no funny face you love, no familiar voice. There’s just a page or a screen sitting there, lifeless. A bunch of symbols.

Furthermore, there’s no sound, no image. There’s not even time or space in which timing can be controlled in order for an act of comedy can take place. There’s just a big block of intimidating gray copy.

So, how do you write humor when it seems you have no tools to do so?

THE TOOLS OF HUMOR WRITING

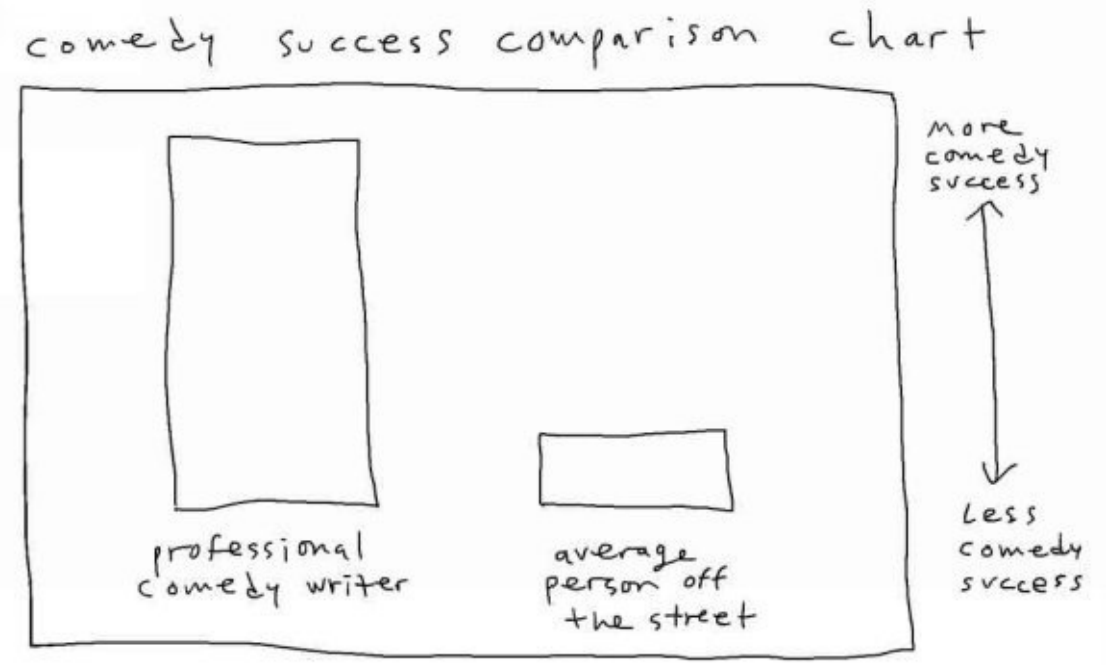
We’ve all heard that humor is a matter of personal taste. What makes one person laugh is different from what makes another person laugh, and there’s no predicting what people will find funny.

Let’s say for a moment that that’s true. There are no objective standards in comedy. That means no one has a better chance of making people laugh than anyone else. Professional comedy writers are on a level playing field with anybody off the street—everybody’s a comedian, tossing off jokes and hoping some of them stick, not having any idea which jokes will get laughs and which ones won’t.

Obviously, that's not how it works. Professional comedy writers have a very good idea what's going to work. It's their job, and they need to be able to do it consistently. And they do it by using special tools, just like plumbers or drywall contractors use special tools to do their jobs.

The tools of the humor writer aren't in a physical toolbox. They're locked away in the subconscious mind of the user. They're tools of knowledge. The professional comedy writer knows how to write humor that the majority of people will find funny, in a reliable and repeatable way.

That said, a lot of these writers don't have much of an idea what the tools look like. They've probably never had to think about it. And most of them would be hard-pressed to explain how to use them. They don't have to—they only need to be able to use them themselves. Most of them developed these tools and the skills to use them over a lifetime of trial and error, practice, dogged persistence, or all of the above. They've become second nature.



Every successful comedy writer uses these tools. Some writers favor some tools over others, but all the tools in the toolbox are the same.

This book is going to describe those tools in detail, and explain how to use them. It's going to condense everything the typical comedy writer or funny person learns about comedy through trial and error throughout their lifetime until it becomes instinct, and it's going to distill that knowledge into a guided process that you can learn.

All the tools of the professional comedy writer, as well as specific instructions for how to use them, are now yours.

These tools will not work all of the time, but they will work most of the time. And that's the best you can get in humor writing. Yes, this is an objective craft, but it's not math or science. It's entertainment. You will bomb sometimes.

The difference between a professional comedy writer and a random person off the street is that the professional comedy writer's material works more often than the non-professional's. There are fewer mistakes. A writer whose humor succeeds most of the time is considered an outstanding success by any standard. In this way, comedy is more like baseball than brain surgery. You might lose more than you win, but you can still maintain a solid batting average. And the good news is, in comedy writing nobody dies when you make a mistake.

But hold on. Being funny is something you're born with, isn't it? You can't teach this stuff. You're either funny or your not. Right?

I've been hearing this conventional wisdom for years. And through those years, I've seen not-very-funny writers—myself included—work hard, apply themselves, and then transform into the most celebrated comedy writers in the world.

When I first got interested in writing humor, I was terminally unfunny, crushingly shy, and always the least charismatic person in the room. Performing was out of the question. Writing, however, seemed within my reach. The problem was, my writing was bad. I had trouble generating my own ideas. I couldn't spell. Much of my early work simply aped the writing I'd seen in *Mad* magazine.

I read whatever I could get my hands on. I craved information about how to write funnier jokes, snappier dialogue, and laugh-out-loud stories. This was before the Internet, and I didn't know anyone who knew how to write comedy. At my local library, there were no how-to books on writing jokes or funny stories. They had only one book in their Arts & Recreation section: *How to Be a Ventriloquist*.

What I wanted was a book explaining the techniques that professional funny people use. I wanted to use those techniques to make my writing funnier. I eventually found prolific author and original "Tonight Show" host Steve Allen's *How to Be Funny*, but it's not exactly a how-to guide. It's just disjointed interviews with him transcribed by a secretary—more a collection of his humor philosophy than any kind of guidebook.

The craft of comedy has been treated, for a long time, almost like the craft of magic. "A magician never reveals his tricks," is how the magician's creed goes. But magicians have nothing on comedy writers. Plenty of magicians explain their tricks in books and magic kits you can buy. When I was a kid, I could buy how-to magic books and magic kits at any department store. Not so with

comedy. Those tricks are never revealed. They've been in a vault. Traditionally, the only way to learn them was decades of practice. You just had to figure it out for yourself.

Until recently.

50 years ago, The Second City in Chicago started teaching people how to perform comedy, and their impressive list of graduates is proof enough that comedy can in fact be taught. They began teaching writing a few decades later, and have since prepared writers for a lot of the top TV comedy shows.

Louie Anderson started a stand-up boot camp where he and others teach the art of stand-up comedy.

Colleges are starting to take comedy seriously as well. Academically focused comedy-writing classes are popping up at prestigious universities everywhere.

But unless you go to one of those schools, there's no divining the skills of humor writing. I'm writing this book in an attempt to create the kind of simple, one-stop, tell-all, how-to book that I was looking for when I was starting out.

Comedy writing is a craft. It can be learned, and it doesn't have to take decades and it doesn't have to be frustrating and isolating.

Finding humor happens in a split second. Your mind makes a connection, it squares with your internal notion of what's funny, then you write it down or say it. Everyone's sense of humor is unique, but everyone who's funny—or has ever said or done anything funny—has followed these same fundamental steps to create that funny moment.

In this book, those quantum, incremental steps that take place in that split second are laid out in the form of a clear blueprint that anyone can learn, practice, then master.

You can make use of this book regardless of your skill level or experience. If you're just starting out, and you want to be a funnier writer, consider this book your comedy basic training. If you're already a pretty good amateur humor writer but think you could make a career out of it, this book is your comedy college. If you're a successful comedy professional and want to increase your hit ratio, this book is your peak-performance coach.

How To Write Funny explains how comedy works, both in your brain and in the brain of your audience. It outlines the simple tools you've probably already used (if you've ever made anyone laugh on purpose), which can be sharpened to produce the same effect on command, to consistently create uproarious comedy. It walks you through the dark valley of fear that many of us experience when faced with the prospect of creating comedy, and leads you to a place of quiet confidence. It lays out the master formula for creating funny material seemingly from nothing, whenever you want.

This book focuses on the written word, but its techniques are applicable to all media of humor, including stand-up, TV, film, web video, and corporate speaking.

We'll focus on the atom of comedy: the single, one-line joke or funny concept. Learning this elemental particle is a critical first step to success in comedy.

Humor-Writing Tip #1: Concept is King

When you write humor, the core concept you're writing about has to be funny. It is, in fact, the most important part of your writing. So, you need to get it right. The greatest, funniest writing in the world will not save a bad concept. But a great concept written even barely adequately will be met with great success.

The "concept" is the simple, funny idea that you're writing about. You need to be able to express your concept in a single line or sentence, with as few words as possible. That single line is what I call a "joke." This core comedic concept introduces readers to your writing, so it's often used as the title, headline, or logline for your work.

Readers need to know what the concept is before they read your work, and it needs to make them laugh. If the concept makes them laugh, they'll read it. If it doesn't, they won't.

Your success in comedy depends on the strength of your concepts.

If you have grander aspirations than mere joke writing, like short articles, stories, novels, screenplays or a network TV deal based on your stand-up act, I urge you to be patient. All media of humor spring from the written word, and all written comedy springs from the single concept. It is in this microcosm of humor that all the principles of the craft can be learned and honed. Master this fundamental skill, and a much larger comedy world will open up for you like a beautiful flower.

This approach is detailed on the opposite page in the first of many humor-writing tips that will dot this book.

One final thought for this Introduction: A lot of people who write books about how to write humor feel a pressure to make the book funny. I won't be making any overt attempts. That's not really the point here. If you want to laugh, I suggest you put down this book and pick up any of my other books—or any humor book—and enjoy yourself. If you want a no-nonsense book about how to write humor, read on.

2: YOUR BRAIN'S COMEDY ENGINE

Writers write. This is one of the first tidbits of advice you get when you start getting serious about writing. And it's good advice. You should be writing. A lot.

But how do you get motivated? Where do you get ideas to write about? And most importantly for our purposes, how do you make your writing funny?

Productive writers of humor churn out a lot of material. They write in a journal, they write in notebooks. They have to write. They're an unstoppable force of nature. If they didn't have jobs as comedy writers, they'd be writing in their spare time. It's how they process what's happening in their lives, how they make sense of their world. It's who they are. Naturally, with all that practice, along with some positive reinforcement and guided skill development (if they're lucky), they usually get pretty good at it.

You can, too.

In order to become a successful working writer, you need to get yourself amped up to write as though you have a volcano welling up inside of you that has to blow. I've never met a successful comedy writer who didn't have this essential quality—that of being compelled to write.

To get to that state, you will likely need to solve one of two problems. Each one holds you back from reaching this high level of productivity.

The first is that you're unmotivated. Lack of motivation is usually a symptom of a lack of confidence. When you lack confidence, you don't believe you're going to write anything worthwhile. Worse, you hate everything you write, and can't bear to see it written down. The end result is writer's block. So, you spend a lot of time fretting while staring at a blank sheet of paper or empty screen, producing nothing. Or you clean your desk, pick up around your house, get grout out of your shower stall with a toothbrush—anything besides writing.

Humor-Writing Tip #2: Quantity Is the Key to Quality

By writing more, you produce a larger pool of raw material to draw quality ideas from. No writer writes only one joke that's pure gold as soon as it's written. One of the myths of writing in general, and comedy writing in particular, is that a genius sits down and cranks out a perfect piece of writing in one draft, without rewriting, editing or proofing. The best comedy writers write dozens and dozens —sometimes hundreds—of jokes, and then carefully select only the best ones to present to readers. They make it seem easy because they never show us all the bad jokes they throw away.

The second problem is far less common. It's the opposite: you have too much confidence, and love everything you write. You think it's hilarious. However, you can't seem to cull it down to the stuff that will resonate with readers. Your overconfidence renders you immune to any meaningful feedback from the outside world.

Both of these problems are the result of an imbalance in the two key mindsets that a humor writer must learn to balance. A humor writer must be a Clown *and* an Editor.

The Clown is the right side of the brain: creative, subjective, outside the box, and nonjudgmental. To write humor well, you need to be a Clown. You need to write down every idea you have, no matter how stupid you think it is.

Overconfident writers favor their Clown brain. They love being silly. They'll try anything to get a laugh. They're comedically unrestrained. And while they may not always succeed, they're always "on."

Being a Clown is a big plus if you're a performer. One extremely successful Clown is Jim Carrey. He's a dynamic performer with a magnetic stage and screen presence. He can say or do just about anything, and the audience loves it because he performs it with unstoppable confidence. Jamie Foxx has a similar quality as a stage performer. He owns the audience, no matter what he's doing.

But when you try to be a Clown on the page, a lot of that confidence and lovable personality that buoyed you in a live-performance medium is lost in translation. Those magical qualities of charisma and presence require in-person delivery. Material that kills on stage comes across as little more than a big mess when put down in the hard light of black-and-white text.

That's exactly what happens when a writer has a Clown-heavy imbalance in the brain.

The Editor is the left side of the brain: logical, objective, organized, and analytical. Most writers are too much of an Editor. Instead of trusting their instincts, they question every choice, and judge every idea before it has a chance to shine. More often than not, they cut every line before they even write it. Nothing is ever perfect enough for the Editor.

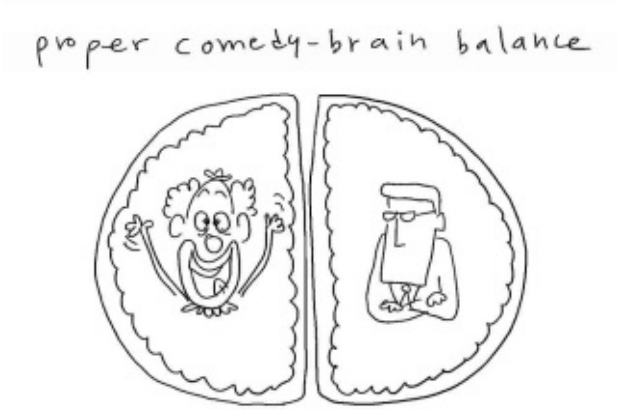
To write humor well, you need to be an Editor, but not too much of one. You need to have a reliable system for judging your ideas to make sure they're not drivel, to workshop and finesse the raw material your Clown comes up with, then craft it into superb humor. But if you're too much of an Editor, you'll rarely produce any work.

Just like we need to balance both sides of our brain to function in the world, humor writers need to balance both sides of their comedy brain in order to function as a writer. You need to be a good Clown and a good Editor.

DEVELOPING YOUR INNER CLOWN

I recommend two simple exercises to cultivate your inner Clown.

The first exercise is the Morning Pages: Write for a half hour every day, without stopping, no matter what you're writing—and no matter how bad you think it is. (It doesn't have to be in the morning, but mornings tend to work best for a lot of writers). This is an extremely helpful habit for writers who tend to be more of an Editor.



The idea comes from Dorothea Brande's schoolmarmish *Becoming a Writer*. Julia Cameron named it in her much friendlier *The Artist's Way*. Many writers have discovered on their own the astounding results that come from forcing themselves to write for a solid chunk of time every day, without judgment.

You can write about your dreams or your fears, or whatever comes to mind. You can even write, "I don't know what to write," over and over. But eventually you'll want to start spouting some varying thoughts, opinions or ideas. It doesn't matter what they're about. No one's going to see this writing. The important thing is to keep your fingers moving. Don't stop to think, don't stop to correct typos. Just keep writing until the half-hour timer beeps.

Since your focus is humor writing, one tweak I suggest to this exercise is to gently guide your mind to think amusing, funny thoughts while you write (but it's worth repeating that you still must write without judgment—even if you think what you're writing is terribly unfunny, you must keep writing). If you find it too difficult to guide yourself toward writing amusing things, that's a valuable discovery. If you tend to write dark, intriguing thoughts instead of funny thoughts when you're in the unconscious "flow" state spurred by this exercise, you may realize that your true calling is to be a mystery writer.

This exercise primes the pump. It forces out material, causing a kind of drain-

cleaning that clears out all the gunk in your brain so the good stuff can start flowing more easily.

The second exercise: Always keep a little notebook with you. Write down every idea you have, especially ones you find amusing. If you have a thought or make an observation at any point in your day that strikes you as funny, you must write it down. If you have an idea that's not amusing—even just an opinion about the world or humanity—write that down, too. These little observations are precious raw material for a writer. They're the crude oil of the humor-writing business. Failing to save them in your notebook is like letting oil from your well spill out all over the sand, costing you thousands—maybe millions—in lost revenue.

Do the Morning Pages exercise every day for a couple of weeks. Make the notebook a part of your lifestyle. If you make a habit of these two simple things, you will go a long way toward rebalancing your brain away from its unproductive Editor and more toward its resource-rich Clown.

Being a Clown is how you generate the raw material you'll use to mold top-notch humor. Much of this raw material is probably not going to be very good, but don't let that concern you. It's still in its raw form. Keep it all—cherish it—and set it aside to be assessed later when you have your Editor hat on.

Once a week, flip through your notebook and save any ideas you still find amusing. This employs the skills of your Editor. If you reject every idea, you still have some rebalancing to do.

Once you have an idea that you like, be it for something big or small, it's time to put on your Clown hat again and write a first draft. If it's a short joke, write it many times, in many different ways, without worrying about whether it's working. If it's a story, crank out a bad first draft. If it's a screenplay or novel, write an unorganized outline. Then put your Editor hat on and assess what you've written. You'll get even better results if you can wait a few days, weeks, or even longer after writing something before you dig it up and put on your Editor hat to assess it. The more you can forget the work of your Clown from days or weeks past, the better your Editor will be at judging it objectively.

If you do this dance between Clown and Editor a few times, you'll improve your dexterity. The back-and-forth reliance on these two very different halves of your brain is like doing mental calisthenics. The more you do it, the more adroit you'll become. Soon you'll be able to move seamlessly between one side and the other as needed, quickly. This is the basic process that a humor writer uses to produce work.

Practice the above regularly, and you'll unleash your inner writer. You'll experience the floodgates of your mind open wide, and you'll never have

writer’s block again.

Furthermore, you’ll occasionally discover gems within all of your raw source material, wonderfully funny concepts that would have remained forever buried had you not carefully, meticulously sifted through your mind by using this process to find them.

DEVELOPING YOUR INNER EDITOR

As you can see, developing the Clown side of your brain is not too difficult. Simply practice the exercises above.

Developing the Editor side of your brain is much more difficult. It’s a more involved and complicated process. If you feel like you’re too much of an Editor, you need to not only strengthen your inner Clown, you need to refine your skills as an Editor so that you won’t simply slip back into your old pattern of rejecting everything your Clown creates. You need objective criteria for assessing your work sensibly, and you need tools to reshape material so that your Editor is justifiably satisfied with the end result.

If you feel like you’re too much of a Clown, you need to develop your inner Editor by learning the same tools and criteria.

Beginning with the next chapter and for the remainder of this book, we’ll focus on the specific skills your inner Editor must use to create great humor.

CHAPTER 2 ACTION STEPS:

1. Buy a little notebook and keep it with you at all times. Write down any thought or observation you have that strikes you as amusing, or even merely interesting.

2. Every day for at least two weeks, do the Morning Pages exercise: Write without stopping for half an hour. Most of what you write in this exercise will be garbage, but you must love and accept it all.

3. At the end of each week, go through your Morning Pages and your notebook. Save any thoughts, ideas, notions or anything amusing to a “short list”—this is your bank of potential comedy ideas.

3: THE HUMOR WRITER'S BIGGEST PROBLEM

The biggest problem a humor writer faces—and it's the same problem all writers face—is a practical consideration that a lot of beginning writers chose to ignore. But it must be confronted, unpleasant as it is.

This problem is not, How do you come up with funny ideas? It's not, How do you get motivated to write? You can solve both of these problems by doing the exercises in Chapter 2. I'm talking about a much more serious problem. This book can help you solve it, but the solution is going to be different for every writer.

Let's say you churn out a few pages of brilliant, funny prose. Then what? Who's going to read it? Your mom, probably. Maybe your best friend. But who else? How are you going to find an audience?

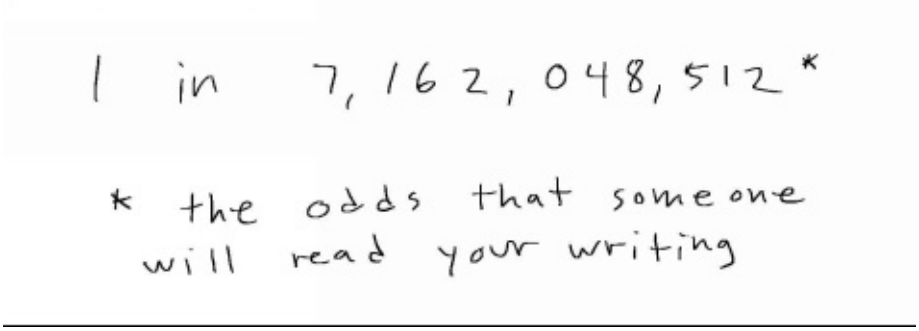
You may think this problem doesn't have anything to do with you or your writing. You may think it's someone else's job to figure it out how to market your work. You may think this problem is largely out of your control, that you just have to sit helplessly and suffer the callous indifference of potential readers, hoping against all odds that your writing gets noticed.

You may plan to post your work online, where potentially millions of people will have access to it. Maybe you know about search-engine optimization, and can use those trick to draw people to your writing.

You may expect that your writing will be published in a high-traffic online or print magazine, then be dutifully promoted on the front page.

You may expect a publisher to buy your book, then promote it with advertising and a book tour, sending you to various cities to do book signings and appear on TV shows.

Let's be realistic. Even if your goals are modest, and you plan to post your work online, do you know how many blogs there are? How about websites and twitter feeds? There's more writing published online every day than has ever been published in the history of human civilization. And that number doubles the next day. The sheer volume of writing available for the discerning modern reader is unfathomable. And it's safe to assume that all of this writing is using SEO, link exchanging, or even paid advertising to find readers. Anyone trying to publish writing online is so far behind before even starting, it's enough to make you want to give up.



If you're lucky enough to have your humor piece published by one of the tiny handful of name-brand magazines that still buy unsolicited humor, you'll still need to make sure your writing is sharp enough that it stands out among the other stories in the magazine—all of which are professionally calculated to compete for readers' limited time and even more limited attention. This is to say nothing of standing out among the stories in the stacks of the hundreds of other magazines released every month.

If a publisher sends you on a tour and books you on TV, you have enjoyed a privilege afforded only the most established and successful writers, and even they—every one of them—would, if you pressed them, in fact complain that their publisher doesn't promote their work nearly enough.

There's no magic marketing spell that the Internet or a publisher can put on your writing to get readers to read it.

This problem is compounded by the fact that readers are a rare thing. Most people don't like to read. They'd rather do just about anything else. In our culture of easy entertainment and instant gratification, reading is akin to homework in most people's minds.

Have you ever noticed how newspapers and magazines list the box-office receipts for movies in millions of dollars? They also list TV ratings, showing how many millions of households tuned into the most popular shows. By contrast, have you ever noticed that they don't list how many books were sold, or how much money those books made? Books are treated differently. Bestseller lists like Amazon and *The New York Times* rank books in order of which ones sold the most. But that only tells part of the story. Where's the money, like in the TV and movie rankings?

The reason they don't tell you the dollar figures is because the numbers would be embarrassing. In some weeks, a book only needs to sell a few hundred copies in order to make it onto the bestseller list. So, in comparison to the number-one movie of the week, which may have grossed $40 million, the number-one book might have grossed $4,000.

So, the big problem remains: How are you going to get people to read your

work? If you don't solve this problem, you'll never find an audience, and your hope of being a working humor writer will be crushed.

Solving this problem is in many ways what the craft of writing is all about, and it will super-charge the quality of your writing if you can boldly face this problem as a necessary challenge.

The good news is, this problem is not outside your control. And it's not someone else's problem. It's your responsibility to find readers, and that means you're in complete control of the solution. There are tricks you can employ to get yourself noticed among the sea of other writing in the world. In fact, you can become a popular humor writer by turning this biggest problem into your biggest advantage.

Don't wait for readers to find you. Make yourself easy to find. The first and most important step to being found is to make your writing accessible. That is, make it understandable to the widest possible audience, appealing to them with as universal a message as possible. Also, present it in a format or medium that readers have easy access to.

By pushing the limits of accessibility, you will virtually compel readers to read your writing. It will jump of the page or screen, grab them, and force them to read it.

There's a thing I used to do when reading the Sunday comics. I never liked "Garfield." I thought it was one of the worst comic strips in the newspaper. But it was so economically written that even as my eyes passed by it in on their way to looking at another comic strip (one that I actually wanted to read) I would read it involuntarily! Jim Davis, the comic strip's writer, demonstrates an extremely effective first line of offense in the quest for accessibility: make it short. Brevity, as we've heard, is the sole of wit. Brevity is also the soul of accessibility, which is arguably no less as important than wit.

Humor-Writing Tip #3: Make It Accessible

Accessible writing is easy to find and easy to read. It's made available to as many readers as possible, written clearly and simply to appeal to as many readers as possible, and covers subject matter that's understandable (ideally of great interest) to as many readers as possible. Because the audience for the written word is so small, the more accessible your writing is, the bigger its potential audience. Reading is hard enough work as it is. Don't make readers work even harder to find or understand your writing. When assessing any humorous concept, you need to ask yourself, How accessible is it?

Let's look at other ways to solve the problem of how to get people to read

your writing. All is fair in love, war and writing. You can break any rule you want in order to get readers. And the first thing you're going to want to do is steal. That's right, steal.

To be very clear, I'm not talking about stealing other people's jokes. If you do that, you may get a laugh, but you'll lose the respect of any readers who recognize your theft, and you'll lose the respect of your peers—especially the peer you stole from—and you'll have a very difficult time ever shaking the reputation within the comedy-writing community as someone who steals jokes.

Don't ever steal anyone's jokes, and don't ever plagiarize.

What I'm recommending is stealing some of the attention-getting traits of other humor media. This is a secret trick to get noticed used by some of the most successful humor writers.

THE SEVEN HUMOR MEDIA

There are seven media for humor: prose, TV/web video, movies, audio/podcast, stage, visual (still image only, with no words), and street art (performance art for unsuspecting audiences, such as pranks, flash mobs, graffiti and outdoor advertising).

We've already laid out one of the biggest weaknesses of the written word (the prose medium): it's not very popular. But let's take stock of its strengths.

Prose has your audience's undivided attention. This is not true of the other media, whose audiences can (and often do) exercise, wash dishes, have a conversation, check their messages—they can get distracted by just about anything—while they're consuming the entertainment. Not so with prose. If they're reading your work, they're not paying attention to anything else.

Another great strength of prose is its intimacy. Prose gets inside the mind of your audience, weaving your ideas with theirs as they imagine a world that brings your work to life for them. They take ownership of this "word picture" because they helped create it. Radio drama is the only other medium that enjoys this magical strength, but radio drama is, sadly, a dead art. No one produces it anymore, and audiences have forgotten how to listen to it. So, there's no danger of the written word facing any competition from radio drama, unless audiences start digging up 1950s episodes of "Suspense" or "Gunsmoke" in droves, which is extremely unlikely.

One great strength of prose is that it lasts longer than any of the other media—a lot longer. We're still reading great works of humor written by Mark Twain in the late 1800s. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (written in 1726) was recently made into a movie starring Jack Black. We're still getting laughs from the humor

writing of Shakespeare, Chaucer, even Aristophanes, whose writing dates back 2400 years. In any other medium, you can't go back more than 20 years without the entertainment appearing hopelessly out of date in terms of production quality alone. You can only go back a few decades with movies or TV shows before a lot of modern audiences will tune out. People aren't interested in scratchy, black-and-white movies or old kinescopes with imperfect sound.

Great humor writing—especially Satire, which is the kind we're going to focus on in this book—is universal. It can transcend time, fashion and taste, rising from centuries past to become just as timely and meaningful as the day it was written.

But these strengths alone don't make up for prose's weaknesses: that its potential audience is tiny, that it's perceived as impersonal, intellectual. It's just a bunch of black-and-white symbols that feel like a chore to read. Not exactly what most jaded modern audiences would consider a good time, or "must see" entertainment.

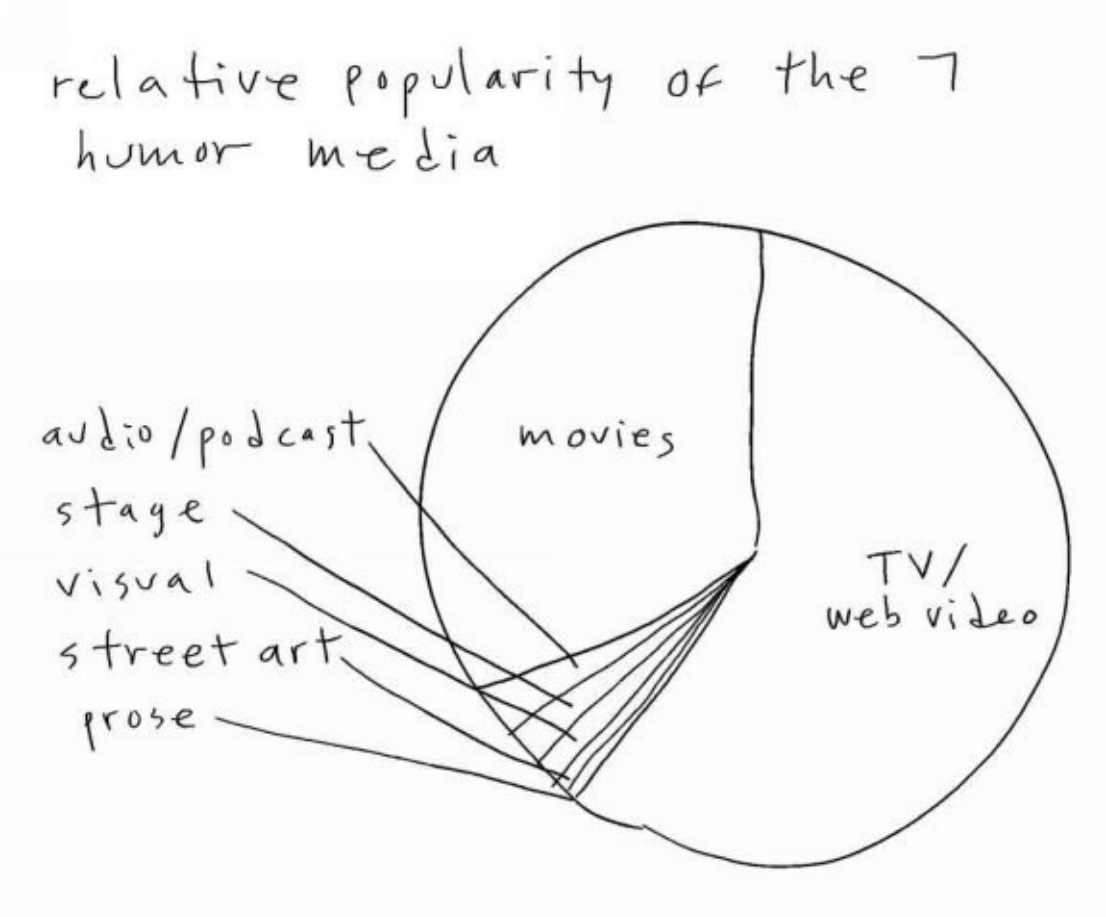
Let's look to some of the other media to see what strengths we might appropriate.

Just as a plant needs to come up with creative ways to attract bees to pollinate it, your writing needs to think of creative ways to attract readers. The prettiest, most fragrant flower is going to attract the most bees.

We've already stolen a great tip from comic strips, acknowledging the importance of brevity. Another great idea from comic strips is the power of the visual medium. Comic strips are, after all, a mixed medium (a combination of prose and visual). Draw a little picture next to your writing, as I've done throughout my career (and this book), or include a funny photo or any other kind of image that makes the writing next to it more appealing to readers.

Internet memes use this tactic to great effect, combining catchy images with very brief text to generate massive popularity, or at least awareness.

One of the late 20th century's greatest satirists, Matt Groening, got his start using the visual medium. He was a writer who, even though he couldn't draw very well, decided to draw pictures next to his writing to make it more appealing, turning it into a comic strip ("Life in Hell"), which led to an opportunity to create "The Simpsons."



TV/web video is the world's most accessible and therefore most popular medium. This is one of its strengths. People love it. We're addicted to it. A citizen of the modern world would find it difficult to avoid consuming humor in this medium. It's thrust at us on our computers, in our phones, and a lot of people have the TV on in their homes all day.

The TV/web video medium has weaknesses, too. It's expensive to produce. It takes a lot of labor from a lot of different skill-sets.

However, a words-only web video is relatively inexpensive to produce. Perhaps set to music as well, web video is an excellent medium for writing. A lot of YouTube videos employ this tactic. We used it at *The Onion* to launch our web video spin-off, *ONN*, in the mid-2000s. Our introductory teaser trailer for *ONN* featured little more than a few words set to music, which led to our turning *The Onion*'s largely prose-based endeavor into a video one. Our web videos featured a lot of on-screen prose humor, like segment titles, lower thirds, and a moving scroll of headlines. This co-opting of the video medium brought a lot of readers to theonion.com to read our prose.

Humor-Writing Tip #4: Make It Short

Anything worth saying is worth saying briefly. It may take more time (Mark Twain famously apologized for a letter's lengthiness by explaining that he didn't have time to make it short), but this is time well spent. Sometimes cutting a word or two can make a line twice as funny, or turn an unfunny line into a funny one. Experiment with your work by cutting words. See if anything's lost. And use simpler, shorter words when possible. By trimming your writing, you force yourself to get at the heart of what you have to say, and you'll say it in a way that readers can more easily digest.

The audio/podcast medium is alive and well, despite the fact that radio drama (a subset) is dead. Audio/podcast is the next most intimate medium, after prose. It's also a uniquely accessible medium. People listen to podcasts and audiobooks on their way to work, while running on their treadmills, and anywhere else they want. Podcasts are a great promotional medium writers can use to make potential readers aware of their writing. Also, writing a script for a podcast is a great way to reach a wider audience. All of those people talking on podcasts have to get material from somewhere.

One strength shared by just about every other medium besides prose is the human element. These media usually do best when a live person presents the written material, either as dialog or monologue. It's impossible to calculate how much more energized an audience becomes when they're being entertained by a person as opposed to a bunch of stifling words. They love it.

You can give the human touch to your writing by creating a facade. When the words become a curtain, and there's a personality behind that curtain, your writing is suddenly electrified as if it's a live performance. Your reader senses the intelligence behind the curtain and the writing comes alive in a way that it can't when you write "on the nose" (the term for writing exactly what you think). There's much more detail on how to achieve this effect in humor writing in Chapter 6.

Street art is one of my favorite media. Audiences who get entertained on the street when they're not expecting it are the best audiences. They're delighted by the surprise inherent in the presentation. There are countless legal ways to get your writing in front of readers using this medium.

The Onion began as a newspaper that was dispensed free on the street. So, part of its early appeal came from using the street art medium. This was, in fact, the primary medium used by *The Onion* to introduce itself to new readers in its formative years. People would walk past grocery stores or bars where free weekly newspapers are distributed, and they'd see *The Onion* among the offerings. At first, they'd be confused by it—the outlandish headlines were out

of place among the straight-laced alternative news, music, or LGBT weeklies that were often found in the same areas. Once passersby realized *The Onion* was a humor publication, they fell in love with it immediately. To this day I hear people fondly reminisce about their first discovery of *The Onion* on the streets of Madison, Denver, San Francisco, or one of the other cities where *The Onion* was distributed in its first two decades, and how absolutely delighted they were to find humor in this unexpected place.

That surprise and delight is one of the greatest strengths of the street art medium. It's virtually impossible to achieve that level of surprise in any of the other media. In all other media, the audience is, at least on some level, expecting to be entertained, which necessarily diminishes the amount of surprise or discovery they can experience.

Carol Kolb is a brilliant TV writer who got her start at *The Onion* in Madison, ultimately rising to the rank of editor-in-chief in the early 2000s. She got noticed and initially hired by *The Onion* largely due to her hilarious street art.

After a college student had gone missing under dubious circumstances, flyers were posted all over campus, asking, "Have you seen this woman?" next to a photocopy of the student's picture. Kolb produced a her own flyer and posted it all over campus, asking, "Have you seen this man?" next to a photocopy of Al from "Happy Days." It was a bold and edgy parody that pierced straight through the media clutter to make a lot of unsuspecting readers laugh.

How can you get your writing seen in unusual or creative ways? What rules of the prose medium can you break in order to ring out above the competition and get noticed? What tactic can you borrow from the more popular or the more fringe media to give your writing as much of a boost as possible?

CHAPTER 3 ACTION STEPS:

1. Write a list of some of the strengths and weaknesses of prose compared to the strengths and weaknesses of the other six media.

2. Make a list of ideas for overcoming the weaknesses of the prose medium in your own writing. What are some strengths of other media that you could employ to help readers find your work?

4: HOW TO GET LAUGHS

Humor is the magic ingredient that makes a dull life fascinating, a sad life happy, and an empty life fulfilling. It's a ray of sunshine in a cold and unforgiving universe—the light at the end of the tunnel of the human condition. Those lucky few who can find humor in a situation—any situation—will not only endure it, but enjoy it, and inspire others to do the same.

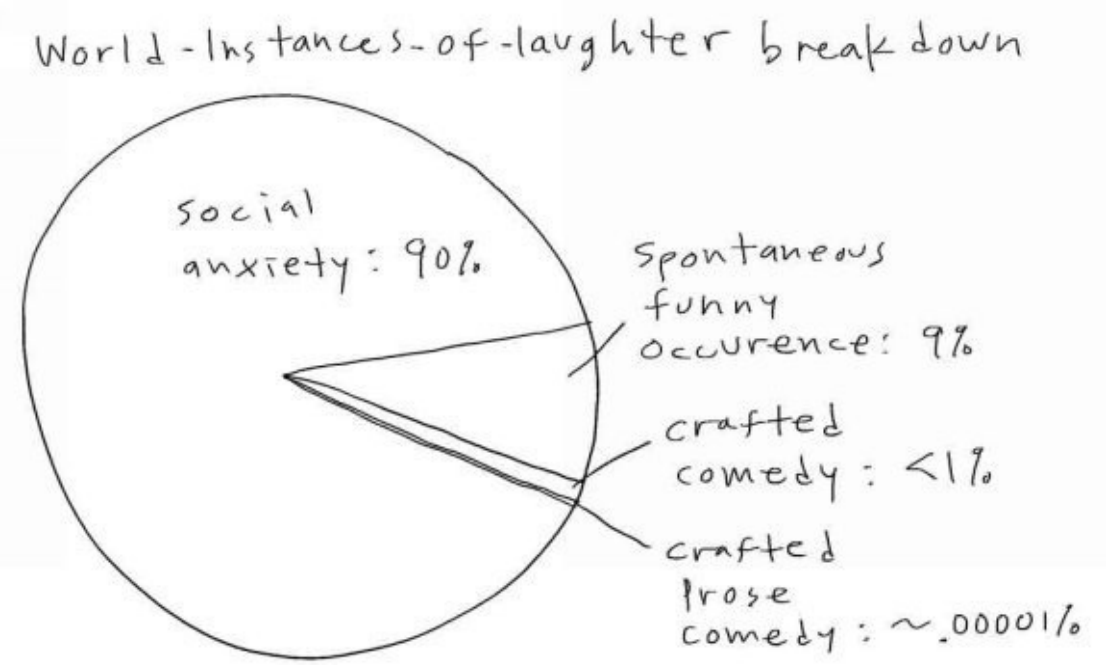
Studies show that people who have a hardy sense of humor have more friends, make more money, and live longer.

No less than the American Cancer Society promotes the power of "humor therapy." Doctors endorse similar treatments for chronic pain sufferers. Laughter Yoga, the practice of fake-laughing until it becomes real laughing, stimulates deep breathing and leads to physical and mental rejuvenation, even demonstrable healing.

Humor, along with its primary effect, laughter, is a big deal. It's important to us all. You ought to be commended for wanting to make the world a better place by working to improve your ability to make people laugh.

What makes people laugh, really? Not fake-laugh, but genuinely laugh. You need to be able to answer this question if you're to succeed at making them laugh. There are different kinds of laughs, and they vary in quality and desirability.

Over 90 percent of all spontaneously generated laughter is nervous laughter. It's people trying to grease the wheels of a conversation or break some tension, real or perceived. There's nothing actually funny going on with this kind of laughter. There's no comedy being crafted. This kind of laughter, though ubiquitous, is an empty, non-healing kind. If laughter is food for the soul, this is the McDonald's of laughter.



Roughly 9 percent of all laughter is good, pure, hardy laughter in response to real-life situations—that crazy thing the dog just did, or the non-injurious fall Myrtle just had off the trampoline. This is the kind of laughter that's good for your lungs, releases endorphins, and generally makes life fun. The more you can get of this kind of laughter, the better off you'll be. Problem is, these kinds of laughs can't be engineered. They can only happen by accident.

The remaining 1 percent of laughter is the most rare. It's laughter gold: an involuntary response to something that was consciously crafted for the purpose of generating laughs. The overwhelming majority of this 1 percent of all laughter is brought on by stage, TV/web video, movie or audio/podcast entertainment. This laughter is often mild, or offered in artificially enhanced form either willingly or by producers' careful manipulation.

When someone is performing for us on the stage, we laugh, even if we don't really think it's very funny. There's a social contract at work in these situations. If we feel like laughing a little bit, we might exaggerate our response to subconsciously appease a performer or join in with a laughing crowd. We might also consciously exaggerate our laughter if we're at the taping of a TV comedy show and the producers have spent as much as an hour prior to showtime encouraging us to laugh often and loudly.

Hearing other people laugh entices us to laugh more readily. Producers of TV shows take great pains to record live audience laughter because they understand its power. The sound of this laughter activates the social contract in us even if we aren't a part of that original audience, but are watching the show long after the

taping, alone at home. Producers also occasionally add canned laughter to a show's soundtrack, either to enhance existing laughs deemed too lackluster to do the job, or to create the illusion of a live audience where none exists. (Canned laughter is audience laughter pieced together from previous performances and then applied to an altogether different performance.) Canned laughter is meant to artificially trigger the social contract, encouraging at-home laughs in those not yet inured to the effects of such cheesy tactics.

Roughly .00001% of all laughter remains. This tiny sliver of laughter is generated by nothing but the written word, no interpersonal reaction with friends or family, no performer, no personal connection, no music, no editing, no sound effects, no laugh track—nothing to enhance the experience beyond a string of words on a page or screen.

Starting in this chapter, I'm going to dissect what type of written humor is going to result in the kind of big, hardy laughs that are the most healing—the milk-coming-out-of-your-nose kinds of laughs—using only the written word.

We'll unlock these tactics first by uncovering the one thing you're absolutely going to need. The one essential ingredient in all humor, without which humor cannot take place. That ingredient is surprise.

There are other things that are helpful to have in humor, like relatability, truth, timing, tragedy, or the breaking of taboos. But humor can still exist without those things. Humor cannot exist without surprise. Even when something expected or even downright predictable happens that makes us laugh, that predictable event must unfold in a surprising way in order to be funny.

So, how do you get laughs? Surprise people.

Of course, not all surprise is funny. Some surprise is scary, some shocking. Some annoying. It's the particular kinds of surprises that make people laugh that we'll be focusing on in this book.

CLICHÉ-BUSTING

Because surprise is the core element of all humor, clichés must be avoided in all humor writing. This is perhaps the most important single thing you can do to instantly elevate your writing to a funnier level.

In Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, the seminal book on how to write competently, the authors offer as a basic writing tip the simple but effective advice, "avoid clichés." It's a good idea to avoid using common phrases like "That's neither here nor there," or "six of one, half dozen of the other," or other useful, very clever phrases in any kind of writing. In prose, these clichés, and thousands more like them, shouldn't be used because they were originally made

up by the witty writer or conversationalist who first used them.

In overuse, such phrases become clichés, and after a time they fail to amuse. The cliché user is admitting failure by using them. The message is, “I was unable to think of a more clever or useful phrase, so I’m going to steal a clever phrase that someone else wrote a long time ago.” Because clichés are in common use, it doesn’t feel like stealing to most writers. Using them is one of the laziest and unoriginal things you can do as a writer.

Good writing is creative. Good writers dream up new ways to say things.

Avoiding clichés is especially important in humor writing. In humor writing, clichés are not defined necessarily as clever phrases you didn’t invent. In fact, in many cases you may *want* to use clichéd phrases in a joke in order to communicate a funny idea in a relatable way. In humor writing, the clichés to avoid are jokes we’ve heard before, topics that have been joked about enough, or patterns of humor that have been overused. Humor clichés tend to evolve, as old ones are quietly retired from common usage and new ones emerge. Here’s a short list of just a few examples that have stood the test of time as of this writing:

- The quality of airline food
- “I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”
- “That’s what she said.”
- A big fake laugh that devolves into an unimpressed groan.
- Illustrating how white people and black people talk differently
- “You should see the other guy” (when someone is roughed up)
- Making the sound of a game show buzzer or winning bell when someone gets the wrong or right answer.
- The taint
- “I just threw up in my mouth a little bit.”
- The “surfer dude” character

Such clichés ring like a discordant note in the ear of the sophisticated reader of humor. If you use a clichéd joke, topic or character, your reader will immediately and instinctively know that your humor writing is not very good, and they probably won’t stick with it long.

Humor-Writing Tip #5: Avoid Clichés

If you’ve heard a joke or funny phrase before, don’t repeat it. Also avoid topics that have been joked about endlessly, like how men hog the remote control, airline food is bad, or white people can’t jump. These are comedy

clichés.

One of the surest ways to tell an amateur humor writer from a professional humor writer is that the amateur will use a lot of clichés, and the professional won't. Professionals come up with their own jokes, explore fresh ways of phrasing ideas. They're always searching for a new approach or a new angle that's never been written before.

There's no surprise with clichés because we've seen the joke before. Only fresh ideas, unique perspectives or original thoughts can surprise. Consequently, only fresh, unique and original writing can get laughs. Well, clichés might get laughs from those who've never heard them before, but you don't want laughs from those people.

That may seem like contradictory advice, given that the goal in humor writing is maximum accessibility, but getting laughs only from to the lowest common denominator actually limits your accessibility. First, unsophisticated audiences will laugh at a lot of things that sophisticated audiences won't, which means the humor may be accessible to some, but it's a turn-off for others. You create accessible humor by appealing to the widest possible audience. Second, there's no reason to use clichés to appeal to unsophisticated audiences when so many other, legitimate tools can be used.

Avoiding clichés is one of the most important "don'ts" when it comes to generating surprise in prose. More "dos" will be outlined here in great detail.

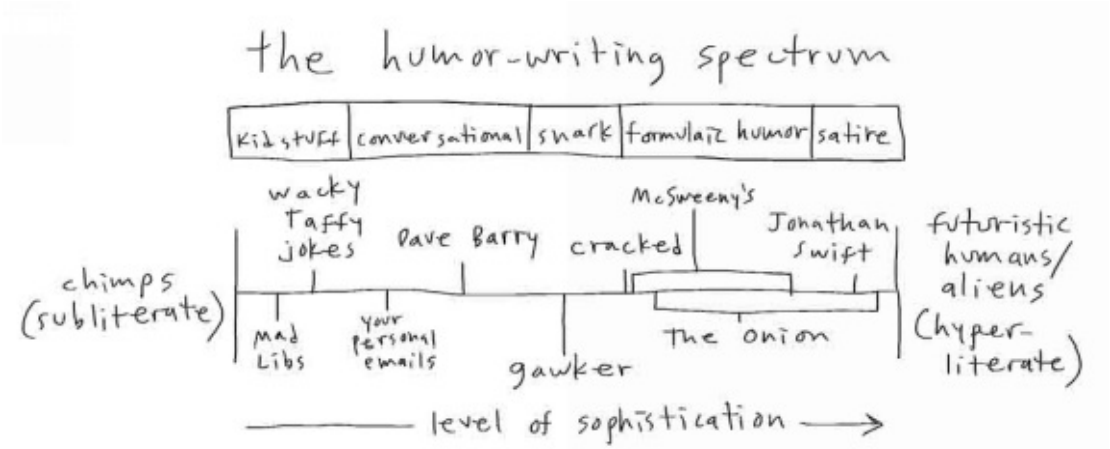
CATEGORIES OF PROSE HUMOR

Written humor comes in five distinct categories. Understanding the difference between these categories can help you get clear about your own writing, and where it naturally falls in the spectrum. Only one of these categories provides the maximum potential for generating surprise, and the laughs that follow. It also offers the largest possible audience.

These categories exist in a range from the basic to the sophisticated. At the basic end of the range, the humor is simple, and has more narrow appeal. At the other end, the humor is more layered, and has more broad appeal—it also takes more skill to produce.

Just like visible light and audible sound exist on a spectrum, beyond which humans can't see or hear, humor also has a spectrum. And just like light and sound have a small range within their perceptible spectrums that produce an effect that's most pleasing to the senses (for example, a sound of 50 Hz is audible, but not very pleasant—just a low rumbling sound without much

definition—but a layered, harmonic sound of 440 Hz, with high-frequency overtones and rich undertones, can be a beautiful note of music), humor produced at the highest end of the spectrum with overtones and undertones that resonate across the entire perceptible spectrum of humor will produce the most hilarious humor.



Written humor that's too far outside the sophisticated end of the spectrum on the right, or too far beyond the basic end on the left, won't make very many people laugh. It will either confound anyone but unimaginably intelligent aliens or futuristic humans on the right, or fail to impress anyone but chimps on the left. But when we produce humor somewhere within this spectrum, we have a fighting chance of making a lot of actual people laugh.

On the bottom end of the spectrum is Kid Stuff. These are the literary equivalent of a funny face, a pratfall, or other very basic types of humor that appeal to the less-than-intellectual reader. There's no higher calling here, no complex structures. This end of the spectrum is made up of things like basic discordance, incongruity, and other elements of surprise based on a very limited understanding of the world. When you call a tree a "dog," for example, or when you pretend to be confused and call a child by the wrong name, or ascribe the wrong age to a child, most 3- to 5-year-olds will find this hilarious. Read a Sesame Street book for very young kids to find a good example of this kind of humor. Kid Stuff isn't likely to tickle the funny bones of too many adult readers.

On the upper end of the Kid Stuff category is simple pun-based jokes from joke books, the jokes on Wacky Taffy packages, as well as simple forms of societal-norm-defying Madcap or Shock-based humor like you see in *Mad* Magazine or the now-defunct *Nick* magazine, forms of humor we'll dig into in more detail in later chapters.

However, as unsophisticated as Kid Stuff may be, these simple things that make a young kid laugh contain the seeds from which more sophisticated humor

is derived.

Next on the spectrum is the Conversational category. This is prose that's written with the author's personality laid bare, or "on the nose," with no attempt to disguise opinions or ideas through another voice or literary device. There is a character here; the inherent character of the writer, but it's not a comedic construct like a character you might find in more advanced humor writing. It's merely the reality-based character of the writer. This is the type of writing you might see in personal letters or notes, where writers attempt to play off key character traits for which they're known, or simply their natural personalities. Dave Barry is probably the most famous purveyor of this kind of writing. David Sedaris is another, though Sedaris uses more sophisticated story structure, veering out of purely comedic structure and into the realm of dramatic writing.

Very close to Conversational, but slightly more sophisticated, is Snark. It's a ubiquitous kind of humor writing most commonly found on blogs, magazines that are trying to sound hip, Facebook posts, and a lot of other places, too. Entertainment and sports news often aspires to this style. Extremely popular now, Snark is essentially Conversational, but with the added layer of smart-alecky sarcasm, the wry attitude of someone who's plugged into the most desirable trends. It's the classic Archetype, the Know-It-All, but in a very transparent form. This veneer is a literary device that masks the writer, but not very believably. As we will see, concealing the writer and the writer's true intent —and doing so believably—is one of the secrets to good humor writing.

Snark is identifiable for its brazen use of clichés borrowed from other Snark writing. Clichés, almost more than the too-hip attitude, are what define this style of writing. Like other humor clichés, those of Snark are cyclical, but as of this writing, "Best. [Insert a thing]. Ever." (with periods between each word) is enjoying widespread use. Faux-Conversational words and phrases like "Welp," (as a version of "Well"), "I know, right?," "Ya think?," "Hells no," and "Wow. Just wow" imply a conversation with the reader that's not actually happening.

LOL, LMFAO and IMHO are all the spawn of Snark. Intentionally misspeaking, using phrases like "the webs," or "bad maths," have become popular since George W. Bush's famous utterance of "the Internets" during a debate with John Kerry.

There are too many others to list, and new ones are always forming. Writers of Snark use clichés with impunity because they're an integral part of the style.

That said, Snark can be effective (and funny) when done well, and without clichés. One of the problems with the form nowadays is that it's overused, and therefore writers in this style have difficulty standing out from the crowd. Mike Nelson (of "Mystery Science Theater 3000" fame) has written some very funny

essays and books in this style. John Hodgman and Sarah Vowell use the form skillfully, though a lot of their writing hits more sophisticated notes as well.

The next category on the spectrum is Formulaic Humor. Here multiple layers of humor are employed, and the primary tools of comedy (the 11 Funny Filters, covered in Chapter 6) are used skillfully to elicit laughter. That's the formula. Formulaic Humor is typically written by professional comedy writers.

Formulaic Humor is often not in a first-person voice, but assumes other character voices and formats. The writer is no longer the focus, like in Conversational or Snark. Rest assured the writer is driving the bus, but entertaining diversions are placed between the reader and the writer in order to conceal the writer and achieve laughs through any number of comedic facades, things like made-up characters, a parody context and others—all of which will be covered in great detail later in this book.

In recent decades, the *National Lampoon* has been a standout in Formulaic Humor, as have Garrison Keillor and the great but short-lived *Spy* Magazine. *Army Man*, though extremely hard to find, was a textbook example.

Formulaic Humor is most often seen on TV and in movies. In these media, the facade of Character is built in, which instantly creates a face that the reader can relate to. It also puts that distance between the writer and the audience. Both of these tactics make for far more engaging writing.

The high standard of Formulaic Humor sometimes causes it to pop into the next highest category on the spectrum, as is the case with all of the publications listed above.

The highest category on the humor-writing spectrum is Satire. This is writing that employs tools from all the categories beneath it, most notably Formulaic Humor, and, like Formulaic Humor, is adept at getting laughs. But Satire has one extra, hidden ingredient that the other categories don't have. This secret ingredient is the one thing that nudges humor writing out of a lower category and into the Satire category. And therefore the laughs it can generate are a lot more satisfying and memorable.

Satire has something to say—something important—that's hidden in the literal text. The writer of Satire uses expertly crafted humor, just like the writers of Formulaic Humor and other categories, calculated to make readers laugh uproariously. But Satire does so as a means to an end. In the other categories, humor itself is the end goal. Yes, readers are laughing at Satire, but they're also getting this secret message. This message makes the material funnier, the laughs more satisfying. Some unsophisticated readers may not even notice the message, or may not care. It doesn't matter. They're still laughing. That's what makes Satire the most accessible category of humor writing.

This secret message is called Subtext.

Writing in any category can occasionally achieve a level of Satire (like Dr. Seuss in Kid Stuff or David Sedaris in Conversational). Those who consistently achieve the satirical category in periodicals are *The Onion*, and occasional writers for *The New Yorker*'s "Shouts and Murmurs" column, like Ian Frazier, Andy Borowitz and Ben Greenman. In books, Satire's masters are Kurt Vonnegut, Leonard Wibberley, Mark Twain, Jonathan Swift, and other luminaries of Satire dating back to ancient Greece and Rome. One stand-out genius who only published one novel (posthumously) is John Kennedy Toole, whose *Confederacy of Dunces* is a masterpiece of English Satire. However, these books all employ dramatic structure. Purely comedically structured satirical books include *National Lampoon's High School Yearbook, Our Dumb Century* and "The Daily Show's" *America: The Book.*

Comedic Structure vs. Dramatic Structure

Comedic structure entails establishing and then escalating a single joke. This simple structure is found in online comedy articles, jokes, one-liners, and TV/web video or movie sketches lasting no more than 5–10 minutes. Comedic structure can produce some extremely funny short entertainment. But if a humor writer wants to write something longer, like a short story, novella, novel or screenplay, comedic structure can no longer be used.

It's impossible to tell a compelling, longer-form story in which the primary structure is comedic. Comedic structure falls apart after only a couple of pages or 5–10 minutes. Audiences get bored with it. Only dramatic story structure can sustain audience interest beyond that time frame. Therefore, in a longer work, telling a story becomes the primary goal. Getting laughs becomes secondary. This is why even in goofy Adam Sandler movies there has to be a semi-realistic love-interest storyline, and a moment of genuine pathos for the main character at the end of Act II. (The only time you see purely comedic structure in a feature film is in sketch movies.)

Learning how to structure comedic stories using dramatic story structure is outside the scope of this book. If you want to write funny stories using story structure instead of purely comedic structure, I recommend first achieving competence with the comedy-writing tools outlined in this book. You'll then find it easier to infuse your longer-form stories with humor.

In other media, the writers of the "The Daily Show" and "The Colbert Report" operate in the Satire category. "The Simpsons," "Seinfeld," and classic TV shows like "All In The Family" are satirical as well, but they also employ tools

of dramatic structure. “Monty Python’s Flying Circus” is the supreme example of modern, purely comedically structured satirical TV writing.

Humor-Writing Tip #6: Proofread

Get your spelling, grammar and syntax right. It’s not that hard. Make a solid effort to ensure no typos slip through. For a really important piece of work like a submission for a job, get some help proofreading. Your work might be just as funny as the competition’s, but if you have a few misspellings and bad punctuation and they don’t, guess who will get the job.

Satirical humor has the potential to appeal to all levels of readers. It freely uses Kid Stuff to appeal to the least sophisticated reader, but employs intelligent Subtext to appeal to the most sophisticated reader. This broad appeal gives it the best chance of any category to connect with the largest possible audience.

In the next chapter, we’ll delve into how to create great Subtext.

CHAPTER 4 ACTION STEPS

1. In your next Morning Pages exercise, try ruminating on these questions: What kind of laughs do you want your writing to elicit? What category has your writing habitually been in? Do you tend to use clichés?

2. Write 10 one-sentence jokes using no clichés.

5: SUBTEXT: THE MAGIC INGREDIENT

Given that surprise is the one ingredient that all humor requires, let's look at how we can generate it in prose.

Surprise can come in many forms. We've learned ways to engineer surprise by borrowing strengths from other media. You can add a surprising image to your writing to draw readers into it. You can pair your writing with a video in order to introduce the critical tool of timing. You can write through the voice of a character, conjuring the human connection that makes media like stage, TV and movies so engaging.

These tactics can be effective for initially drawing a reader into your writing. Using a character voice, especially, can command a reader's attention. However, once they get the joke, or understand what's supposed to be funny about it, they may tire of the writing and abandon it if there's nothing deeper going on.

Using only comedic structure, you can keep the surprises coming and create the feeling that the writing is getting funnier and funnier through the use of Subtext.

In any sophisticated writing, there's more there than just the literal words on the page. There's something else that those words aren't saying, but rest assured it's being communicated clearly to any reasonably intelligent reader. What's being communicated is the Subtext.

When you read a joke, or a funny line in a larger story, you add two and two in your mind, and you expose the Subtext that the writer has hidden in the joke. It's this exposure that surprises you, and causes you to laugh.

In a joke, the Subtext is what you "get." If you didn't get a joke, it means you couldn't decipher the Subtext. If you got the joke, and laughed, you were able to subconsciously uncover the joke's Subtext exactly as the writer intended.

All good jokes have Subtext, as do all good comedy articles, short stories and novels. What makes the Subtext of Satire special is its quality.

Subtext in humor writing is usually a value judgment or opinion held by the writer. In the good Satirical writing, that Subtext is universal, something that just about anyone can relate to. In the very best writing, it points out something wrong with the world, a fatal flaw or weakness in humanity or the universe. It can even be a sad fact, something that cannot be changed, yet the writer is compelled to point it out, to publicly yearn for things to be different.

The funniest humor often has the most interesting, original and astute Subtext. A joke can still be funny with mediocre Subtext, but rich, interesting Subtext will almost always make it better.

Humor-Writing Tip #7: Have Something to Say

To be a writer, the first thing you need is something to say. Without that, why are you writing? By regularly sifting through your notebook and Morning Pages, you'll eventually find something worthy of being communicated to others that you can get passionate about.

Subtext isn't the same as a theme or moral. The theme of a piece of writing is the general subject being explored, and it often can't be reduced to a single statement. Subtext, on the other hand, can be. Theme is often overtly articulated in the writing. In certain screenplay-writing circles, for example, writers are told to be sure a secondary character verbally states the movie's theme on a certain page in every script. Morals are similar. A parable or other type of lesson ends with "the moral of the story," which is advice the writer would like readers to learn from or live by. Subtext is not advice. It's a value judgment.

Unlike with themes or morals, you never state the Subtext. If you do, your humor writing will fall apart. It's called Subtext because it's concealed under the text, and never revealed except inside the reader's mind. It's like a subway. It travels underground. If it traveled at street level, pedestrians, cars, and everything else would get plowed through as it crashed through everything in sight. This havoc is a fitting analogy for what happens to your humor writing when you state your Subtext.

Humor-Writing Tip #8: Know What Joke You're Telling, And Be Sure Your Reader Knows What Joke You're Telling

Always be in control of the message by using a clear, intentional Subtext. Never leave a joke open to interpretation. When you ask yourself, "What is my joke really saying?" You need to have a specific answer. You need to know what your Subtext is, and how you're revealing it to your readers. If you don't know what you're saying, or why you think it should be funny, you have no control over what Subtext your readers discover, no control over how they discover it, and therefore almost no chance that they'll laugh at it.

In Satire, the Subtext is revealed in each joke. In a longer form of writing, each joke (or "joke beat") is spaced out in the writing so the writer can exercise some control over when the reader laughs, and when the reader gets a break from laughing, creating just the right pace.

To some degree, Subtext is subjective. What one person reads into a piece of humor writing may be different from another person. The skilled comedy writer

aims to make the Subtext of any joke as clear as possible, so as to control the message being delivered to the reader.

Subtext is the most important part of your writing. Jokes by themselves without much Subtext are a fun yet somewhat empty experience. As a writer, you have one mission: to communicate ideas to readers. Your Subtext is where those ideas are. They're not in your literal text. Your literal text is merely the delivery medium—a UPS truck. What you want your readers to get is the precious cargo inside—the stuff they ordered. Those are the core ideas you want to communicate.

You don't want to leave humor writing too open to interpretation. You don't want to shoot your message with a shotgun, spraying out ideas with any number of broad interpretations—this is the realm of fine art and other non-comedic modes of expression. In comedy, you want to shoot with a laser rifle, to avoid any possible misinterpretation of your message. If people misinterpret your message, they may not get your joke.

Science Fiction

Science Fiction, a genre of storytelling that emerged in the 19th century, has a lot in common with Satire. By looking closely at science fiction, we can better understand Subtext and how it works in Satire.

Many of the same techniques for writing humor discussed in this book are employed in the best science-fiction stories. Foremost among these techniques is the use of Subtext. Science fiction is essentially Satire but instead of using humor to communicate Subtext, it uses the awe of science, the future, or worlds and aliens yet unknown.

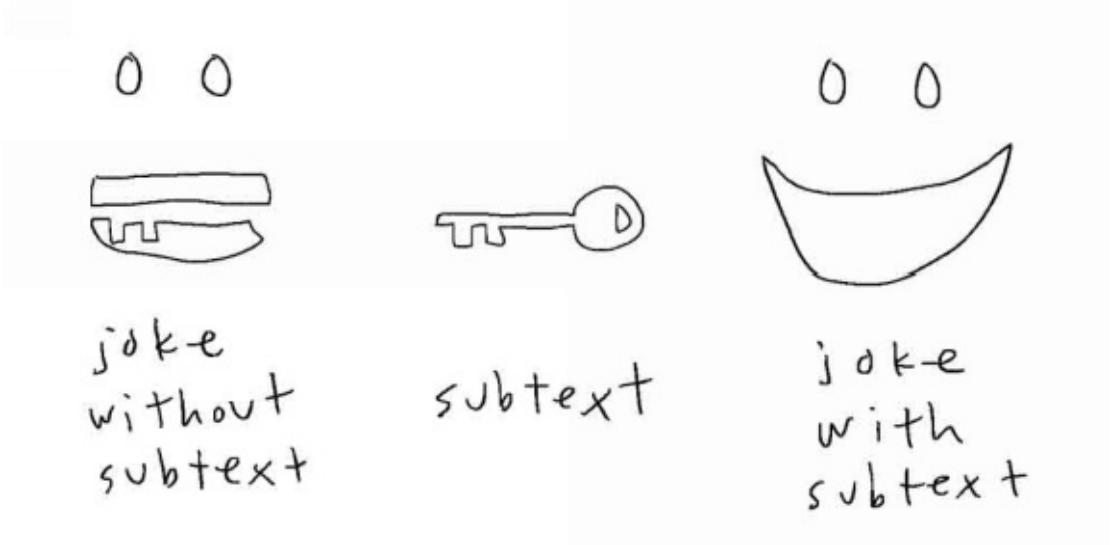
Virtually all science-fiction stories have a sobering, progressive message beyond the surface text of the story. For example, H. G. Wells' War of the Worlds*, one of the earliest and greatest science-fiction novels, says, "Humanity's arrogance as the dominant species may be unwarranted." George Orwell's* 1984 *says, "Totalitarianism destroys souls."*

In science fiction, it's often easy to spot the Subtext. It's the awesome spectacle, not the Subtext, that makes it fun. In Satire, Subtext is more hidden, and it's the discovery or realization of the Subtext that makes it funny.

It can be awkward to try to articulate Subtext, because we normally don't say it out loud—we only think it. But to write successful humor, you need to be aware of your Subtext.

You also need to be in total control of it. You need to know what Subtext you intend to communicate, and you need to orchestrate its optimal discovery by the

reader. That's the singular skill of the humor writer.



By the same token, comedy is not math. You need to allow for a little wiggle room in the articulating of Subtext. You will naturally get different opinions from different readers as to what exactly the Subtext of a given work of Satire is trying to communicate. Nonetheless, the goal of the writer must always be as little variance in interpretation as possible.

Subtext can usually be stated in a simple sentence: subject, verb, object. And it must be irreducible. It can have no hidden meaning in itself. If your Subtext has a hidden meaning, or deeper Subtext, or is itself trying to be funny or tell a joke, then it's not your true Subtext. The Subtext of any piece of humor writing is a simple statement of opinion. Furthermore, it must be coherent, something people will understand.

You can identify Subtext by looking closely at a single funny line and asking yourself, "what is this line really saying?" What you'll find is that once the joke is deconstructed, it's communicating a strong value judgment or opinion held by the writer, an observation about life.

Former *Onion* and "Colbert Report" writer Dan Guterman is one of the best joke writers in the world. He issues a steady stream of great jokes on his Twitter feed (@danguterman). Here are some, broken down into their subtextual message:

Don't forget: Tomorrow is Bring Your Daughter To Tears Day.

SUBTEXT: The idea of Take Your Daughter to Work Day is sad, that in our society girls (not boys) need this extra exposure to the workplace.

Couldn’t get tickets to the Daytona 500, so I just stayed home and set a box of Tide on fire.

SUBTEXT: NASCAR is a pathetic, too-heavily sponsored sport, and it’s a twisted fact that many people watch if for the accidents.

Fun Fact: If you stretched out your intestines they would reach all the way to the cabin in the woods you were murdered in.

SUBTEXT: It’s a little unsettling when people point out how long our intestines are.

Notice how in each of these jokes, the Subtext points out a problem with humanity or society. The best satirical Subtext does this. That is, in fact, the role of Satire.

Dan uses so many Funny Filters (chapter 6) as well as techniques to create edginess (chapter 9) that it’s often difficult to narrowly define his Subtext—there’s a lot going on in each joke, and they can be interpreted in slightly different ways. Subtext is somewhat personal, but his jokes aim well, so there’s not too much room for misinterpretation, and wherever you come out, you’re tapping a rich vein of Dan’s opinion on any given subject.

Humor-writing Subtext does not need to be funny. In fact, it usually isn’t. “People are cruel,” is a subtextual message that’s been used to great effect by many Satirists. “Racism is wrong,” worked well for Mark Twain. “Totalitarian government is dehumanizing” and “Power corrupts” worked very well for George Orwell. Subtext that’s worked well for other satirists over the years: “Relationships are not special”; “People who have kids are selfish”; “Governments are incompetent”; “We’re all slaves.”

Not only are some of these not funny—many are downright sad, even scary! This kind of dark Subtext can make for extremely powerful and memorable humor writing. Steve Allen said, “comedy equals tragedy plus time.” In fact, he believed the source of all comedy was tragedy.

Todd Hanson, *The Onion*’s head writer for many years and one of the handful of people instrumental in forging *The Onion*’s uniquely dark and sardonic style, said humor is about one thing: “life’s nightmare hellscape of unrelenting horror.”

Don’t discount the power of tragedy, either in your own life or in the collective life of humanity, to make for powerful Subtext that can lead to some of the most richly satisfying humor.

HOW TO COME UP WITH SUBTEXT

Do you have any opinions? Do you feel passionately about anything? Do you have ideas about life, people, the world, and what's wrong with everything? Of course you do. And that's all you need to make great Subtext.

Humor-Writing Tip #9: Comfort The Afflicted, Afflict The Comfortable

This tip comes from journalism, but it works for Satire, too. If the target of your Satire is the downtrodden, such as the homeless, or victims of a tragedy, it will come across as mean-spirited, and audiences won't find it funny. You can make a joke about anything you want, but the target must deserve ridicule. The best targets are usually "the comfortable": the status quo, an entrenched power, or any authority, no matter how low-level.

There are two simple methods you can use to create Subtext.

First, look through your notebook of ideas or a Morning Pages exercise you've written. These are glimpses into what madness is floating around in your subconscious mind—disconnected opinions, thoughts or ideas that are yearning for some kind of expression. These are notions bubbling up from he darkest caverns of your intellect that on some level you care about. Maybe you didn't realize you cared about them until they popped out of you in one of these exercises. But they popped out all the same, and now you can use them. Some of these opinions or observations could be Subtext in themselves, some might reveal a deeper Subtext. Either way, try to dig down to the core message.

Second, generate some jokes or ideas that you think are funny using the Morning Pages just-move-your-fingers-and-keep-writing approach, then, later, when you have your Editor hat on, read through these ideas and ask yourself what these misshapen half-jokes are really saying—what's the Subtext? If you detect astute Subtext, there's a good possibility that joke is working, and you should consider refining it.

In the next chapter, you'll find specific tools for refining a joke, and transforming Subtext, which is often not inherently funny, into jokes that are actually funny.

CHAPTER 5 ACTION STEPS:

1. Look at your exercise from the last chapter, your 10 jokes, and determine what the Subtext is for each joke. Try to write out the Subtext of each idea using a simple subject-verb-object sentence. What is your joke really saying when you strip away the humor?

2. Write 10 different Subtext ideas. These shouldn't necessarily be funny.

They're just opinions or value judgments like, "We're destroying our planet," or, "People without a legitimate handicap should not be allowed to ride mobility scooters in the grocery store."

6: THE 11 FUNNY FILTERS

The Subtext of any joke must be thinly veiled, and there are 11 different ways to veil it. By filtering your Subtext though one of these 11 “Funny Filters,” you create a barrier between your reader and you—more specifically, between your reader and your intended Subtext—allowing the reader to add two and two to discover your hidden message.

That discovery results in a laugh. This is how all jokes work.

They’re called Funny Filters because the humor writer starts with Subtext, which is not usually very humorous, then filters it through one or more Funny Filters so it comes out the other end as a joke.

Each Funny Filter is described in this chapter in no particular order.

There may be other ways to make people laugh besides these 11 Funny Filters. What makes someone laugh is sometimes unpredictable. Just about anything can make someone laugh at the right time, under the right circumstances, and in the right context. However, if something causes someone to laugh that’s not one of the 11 Funny Filters, that’s not a reliable or repeatable occurrence. What the 11 Funny Filters offer is a level of objectivity and predictability.

Humor-Writing Tip #10: Heighten Contrast

Humor often involves the contrasting of two things, whether it’s the straight character and jokester, two opposing ends of an ironic situation, or a fake world and the real world. A common flaw in a lot of unsuccessful humor is that the contrast inherent in the joke is not heightened enough. By simply heightening the contrast to its greatest possible extreme, a lot of comedy writing is made instantly funnier.

To appeal to the widest possible audience, the humor writer must create a situation in which jokes have the best chance to succeed. In professional comedy writing, only these 11 Funny Filters will meet with consistent success. If a piece of your writing doesn’t employ at least one of the 11 Funny Filters, or it’s not using the Funny Filter(s) properly, very few readers will find it funny. If you use them as directed, most readers will find your writing funny most of the time.

And that, as we’ve established, is the most objectivity and predictability you get in comedy: the chance for a good batting average.

FUNNY FILTER 1: IRONY

Irony happens when the literal meaning of what you write is the opposite of the intended meaning. “Opposite” is the key word. Irony is all about opposites. If the Subtext you want to communicate is “nuns are weird,” you would use Irony to create a joke by expressing the opposite opinion: “Nuns are perfectly sane,” or “There’s nothing strange about dressing in a cumbersome headdress, locking yourself in a church and avoiding sex for the rest of your life.”

The trick to Irony is heightening the contrast so that the two things you’re contrasting are truly polar opposites.

When you learn to drive, the instructor may have referred to proper steering-wheel handling as “9 and 3”—with hands on opposite ends of the wheel, giving you maximum leverage to turn in either direction. “10 and 2” would be hands too close together, giving you less leverage to control the vehicle in an emergency. Think of contrast in Irony in the same way.

You’re playing play a fun game with your readers—they want to see how far you’ll go to espouse the opposite of your opinion.

Here are some headlines from *The Onion* that use Irony:

- Alcoholic Father Disappointed In Pothead Son
- Cool ‘Cybergranny’ Needs Machines To Help Her Live
- Mother Theresa Sent To Hell In Wacky Afterlife Mix-Up
- It’s Not A Crack House, It’s A Crack Home

Irony can sometimes be confused with the “Ol’ Switcheroo,” which is when a joke turns out differently than expected. Turning out differently is not the same as turning out the opposite, which is the key to Irony. Switcheroos also happen when two things trade places in a joke. “Dog Bites Man” is a well-worn example.

The Ol’ Switcheroo is sometimes used to construct remedial jokes, often in comic strips and mediocre sitcoms. (“Did you take the dog out?” “I couldn’t.” “Why not?” “The dog took *me* out!)

Irony is also sometimes confused with Sarcasm. Sarcasm is “Irony light”—a watered down version that’s delivered with an annoying attitude that exposes its Subtext in too knowing a way, like a teenager might try to get a laugh by saying, “Oh, I’m *so* excited to get up and go to school today.”

Sarcasm isn’t all that funny because it’s not believable. Sarcasm isn’t trying very hard to fool anyone.

By contrast, when you use Irony as a literary device in Satire, you pretend to adopt the opposite of your true message with absolute conviction, and you play it

straight.

Neither Switcheroos nor Sarcasm count as Funny Filters, and can't be trusted to make professional-quality jokes.

IRONY SUMMARY:
WHAT IT IS: Extreme Opposites
HOW TO USE IT: Write the polar opposite of your Subtext.

FUNNY FILTER 2: CHARACTER

Character is the most popular Funny Filter. It's used almost exclusively on every comedy TV show, comedy movie, and most sketch and improv shows. It's the great engine behind virtually all performance-based comedy. Character is important in prose as well, but, like all of the Funny Filters, works especially well—and makes for more layered, literary humor—when used in combination with other Funny Filters.

The idea behind Character is simple: When a comedic character acts on his, her or its clearly defined traits, a joke results.

The key is that the character must be comedic. A comedic character is a very simply drawn, two-dimensional character who has no more than 1–3 traits, which the reader is made aware of, quickly, through the character's actions or simple exposition.

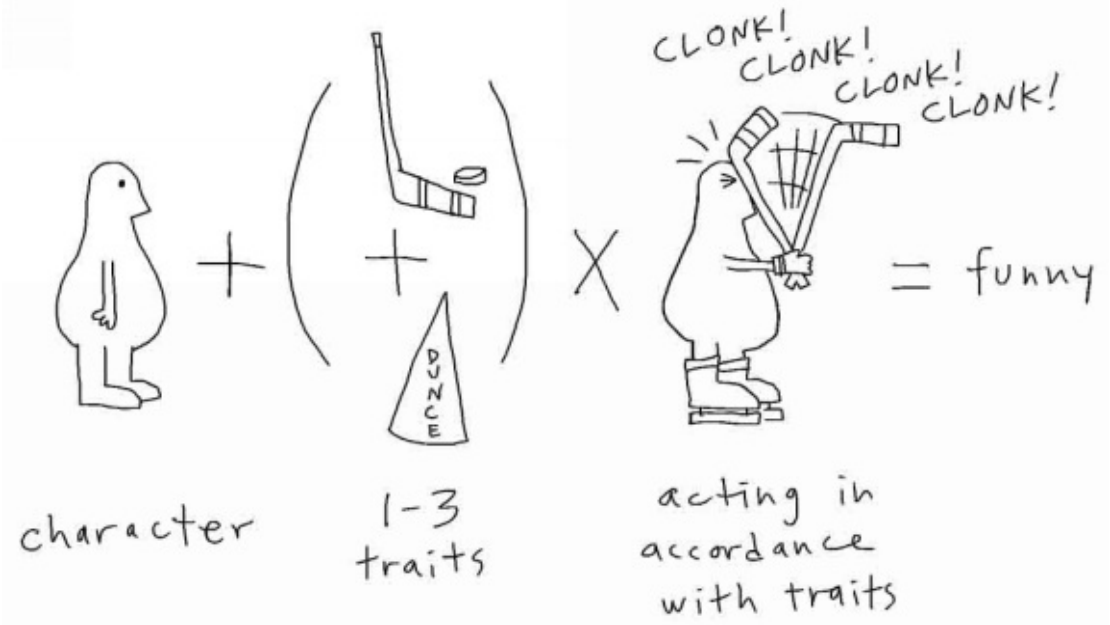
Comedic characters aren't meant to be realistic like dramatic characters. Dramatic characters are meant to seem three-dimensional, like flesh-and-blood people with nuance, contradictions and complex histories. Readers want to feel like they actually know dramatic characters. Writers often write long bios for these characters, figuring out what they eat for breakfast, where they went to elementary school, who their ancestors were.

Humor-Writing Tip #11: Use Verisimilitude

If you're copying something else in form, which you'll often do in Satire (be it a pattern of speech, a character, or another work of entertainment), you must make it as similar to the thing your imitating as possible. If it's a senator character, for example, he should talk like real senators talk. If it's a parody of, say, an advertisement, it should sound as much like a real advertisement as possible. Be consistent, and never "break voice."

Comedic characters are much simpler. You don't want to write a long, detailed bio for a comedic character. You just want to list 1–3 traits. Comedic characters

aren’t meant to seem real. They’re meant to merely represent a fundamental flaw that all human beings share. We can all relate to a comedic character who symbolizes one of our core weaknesses. Laughing at them allows us to laugh at ourselves and the inherent foibles that make us all alike. Readers don’t see comedic character as real, nor do they want to. They expect them to be simply drawn.



That’s not to say that a comedic character can’t be effective in dramatic writing. The Character Funny Filter can be applied to any kind of writing, dramatic included. Any time a dramatic piece of writing needs a joke or a funny moment, it relies on one of the 11 Funny Filters, most commonly Character.

It may be a jarring shift in tone to introduce a comedic character with less than three traits into a serious story with, say, a well-rounded main character who’s a cancer survivor. So, the tonal treatment of each character must be managed carefully. A character who’s friends with this main character, who has maybe one dominant character trait but is otherwise realistic, could serve as an excellent source of comic relief in a story like that.

Even a dramatic lead character can be made comedic during a short sequence or scene—as long as one or two traits of the character that are more comedic than dramatic (simple traits that reveal a relatable flaw) are brought to the fore during that scene, and the character acts on those simple traits. This can serve to create a funny moment in an otherwise serious, dramatic story. For example, when JoBeth Williams encounters the Kramers’ son in the middle of the night in *Kramer vs. Kramer*. It’s a dramatic movie with dramatic characters, but this scene is made funny by reducing Williams’ character to 1–2 traits: she’s naked

and embarrassed. Other Funny Filters, including Irony and Shock (Funny Filter 3), are employed as well, making the scene a guaranteed laugh.

Most stand-up comedians use the Character Funny Filter to create a character for themselves, their "persona." These are case studies in the Character Funny Filter and how simple it is to use: John Pinette is the fat guy who loves to eat; Marc Maron is the anxiety-ridden over-sharer; David Spade is the smartass. They have 1–3 simple traits, and often start their acts by defining those traits so they can get laughs acting on them, or telling jokes in which they act on them.

ARCHETYPES

There are several classic Character Archetypes, characters who have been used and reused in performance comedy and prose for centuries. Many of them come from the Italian Renaissance theater (the *Commedia Dell'Arte*), but some have their origins even earlier, in Ancient Greek theater. Certain characters keep coming back because they have universally appealing qualities, and audiences love them. They include the Dummy, the Slob, the Snob, the Know-It-All, the Every-man or Every-woman, the Manchild, the Klutz, the Lothario, the Nerd, the Robot (or Straight Man), the Naif, the Bumbling Authority, and the Trickster. There are many others.

Most of these characters are self-explanatory. The Manchild is a character who acts with far more emotion than situations require, often bawling and throwing tantrums like a child. This character represents the child in all of us. Will Ferrell almost always plays the Man-Child. Sometimes this character is a Womanchild, but far less often. Lucy on *I Love Lucy* is one example.

The Bumbling Authority is the blowhard in charge, usually flashing some kind of badge or official emblem indicating station or rank. The Bumbling Authority talks big, but is an obvious fool. This Archetype represents bureaucracy, or the incompetence at the top of all power structures. Few things entertain audiences more than seeing authorities brought down to size, and that is precisely this character's purpose.

The Onion is a Bumbling Authority character. It purports to be a serious and official engine of truth in the world, yet it spouts nonsense.

One fascinating character often used as the driving force in comedy is the Trickster. The Trickster plays games and can violate the rules of society or even reality in order to win. The Trickster has its origins in African mythology, and is often a rabbit or a fox. Dr. Seuss was a master of the Trickster, using him for *Cat in the Hat*, *Fox in Sox* and other books. In movies, Ferris Bueller is a famous Trickster. Bill Murray, in his heyday in the 1980s, often played Tricksters.

Stereotypes

Archetypes are not stereotypes. Stereotypes are Archetypes gone wrong, when a foreign people or, worse, an oppressed minority population, are characterized with cruel or offensive traits. Archetypes, on the other hand, are universal, and aren't specific to any race or nationality. Stereotypes, like clichés, should never be used in comedy. They're a red flag to readers, signifying bad writing. The only justifiable reason to use stereotypes in comedy is when you're making fun them, or of people who use them, or otherwise deconstructing or commenting on them in an enlightened way.

For a comprehensive example of classic modern Character Archetypes, you needn't look further than *Looney Toons*. In many ways this is the *Commedia Dell'Arte* for the modern age. Bugs Bunny is a classic Trickster. Daffy Duck is a Bumbling authority (often assaying roles as sheriffs, commanders or other authorities) who always proves himself a fool. Elmer Fudd is the Dummy. Pepé LePew is the Lothario.

When selecting a main character, it's often a good idea to use an Archetype. Archetypes are a proven success that have been beloved for eons. Secondary and tertiary characters are less critical, and can get by as quirky, non-Archetypes. In any case, we needn't limit ourselves to stock characters in prose. And we may not want to. Archetypes can have a tendency to come off as clichés because they've been used so often, especially if no effort is made to distinguish them from similar Archetypes of the past. Comedy always works better when characters sparkle with originality.

To create original comedic characters, you can use one of two methods.

One, you can think up someone with a nice mix of 1–3 traits. A nice mix of traits in comedy often involves some Irony. For example, an insurance actuary who wishes he were a football player, yet is a weakling constantly stricken with illness. This method of character creation is perfectly acceptable. However, you may not have a character that's going to connect with many readers if it's not an Archetype.

Two, you can use one of the Archetypes, but reinvent it. You can make Archetypes feel fresh by doing one of three things: (1) give them a job or station that we've never seen before, (Example: Ace Ventura is the Bumbling Authority, but he's a pet detective); (2) make them a race, creed, species or thing we've never seen before (Example: Mr. Peabody is the Know-It-All, but he's a dog); or (3) put them in an environment we've never seen them in before (Example: in *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, Arthur Dent is the Everyman, but he's in

outer space).

Some examples of Character:

"I don't get no respect at all. The other night I felt like having a drink. I said to the bartender, 'surprise me.' He showed me a naked picture of my wife."

—Rodney Dangerfield

Note how Dangerfield establishes his one trait (he gets no respect), then presents an example of him acting in accordance with that one trait (or in his case, him being acted upon, which reveals the trait just the same).

Philandering String Theorist Can Explain Everything

—*The Onion*

This a textbook Character joke. It establishes two traits: (1) he's a philanderer and (2) he's a string theorist. Then it shows him acting on both those traits at the same time in a double entendre (a product of another Funny Filter we'll discuss later in this chapter).

CHARACTER SUMMARY:

WHAT IT IS: A character with 1–3 clear traits.

HOW TO USE IT: The character acts or is acted upon in accordance with one of the traits.

FUNNY FILTER 3: SHOCK

Sex, swearing, violence, or any overt gross-out are the go-to tools of Shock. This Funny Filter encompasses anything that would be inappropriate to mention in mixed company.

Shock startles readers into laughter, and shakes them out of the polite, civilized box society tends to squeeze us into without out realizing it. And it works wonders. It loosens people up and gets them laughing.

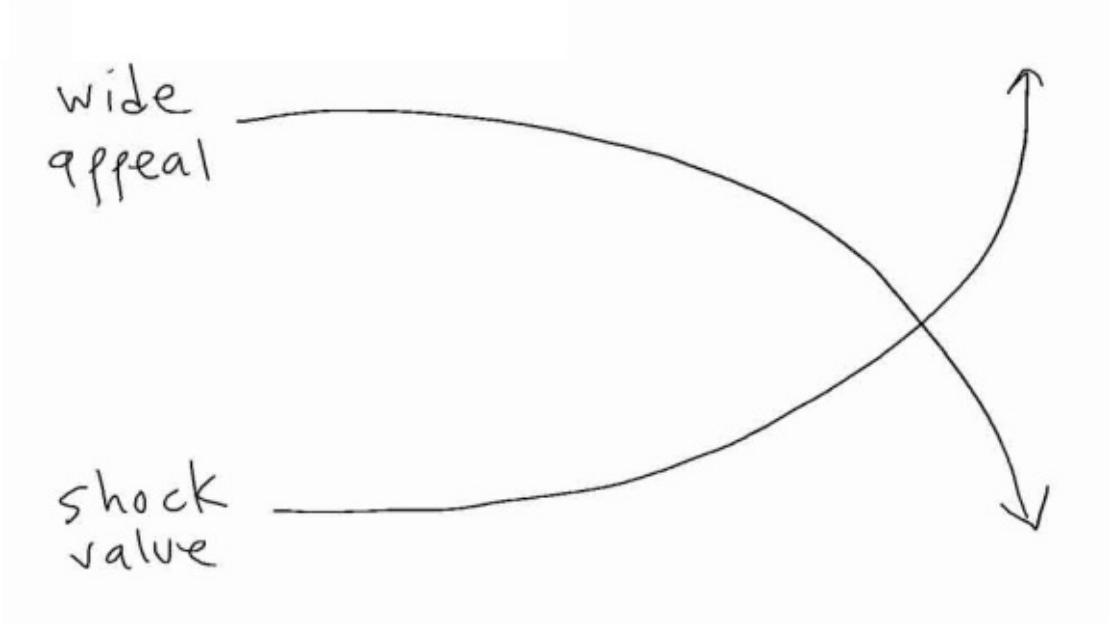
Shock can range from mild to extreme. A joke can have just a dash of Shock, or it can have an overdose, depending on what's required to communicate the Subtext.

In most instances, Shock is best used as a garnish, not the main course. As a main course, its audience is limited. Just about everyone enjoys a little Shock in their humor. Humor, after all, comes from surprise, and shock is simply an amped-up kind of surprise. Fourteen-year-old boys (and those with a 14-year-old

boy sensibility) like it best of all. They're Shock's most eager audience. In fact, they can't get enough of it. You can target that demographic quite easily by overloading your work with Shock. But beware—the more Shock you use, and the weaker your Subtext, the more you alienate the rest of the audience. Fourteen-year-old boys don't require any Subtext in their Shock humor.

And that's the most important guideline to remember about Shock—a little bit goes a long way. Individual writers have to be the judge of how much is too much for their audience. A good rule of thumb is if you think it's gratuitous, it probably is.

Shock is best used in service of good Subtext. When used in moderation and with good Subtext, Shock can appeal to not just the 14-year-old boys, but everyone else, too. A good example of shock humor done well is the spread in *America: The Book* that shows the nine Supreme Court justices naked. Seeing old, out-of-shape people naked is inherently funny for its Shock value, but this stunt had good Subtext as well: Supreme Court justices, and therefore the laws they uphold, are not infallible, they're (visibly) flawed, just like the rest of us.



POOPING AND FARTING

Amateur humor writers often turn to pooping and farting with the expectation that instant and hardy laughs will result. These and other bodily functions count as gross-outs and therefore Shock. That means they technically qualify as legitimate humor when used properly (that is, in moderation and/or in service of good Subtext). The problem with most amateur pooping and farting humor is

that it's not used in moderation, and it rarely has any Subtext.

The human butt is the single funniest thing in the known universe. This is undisputed. Any time a human butt is referenced, seen, or used in a joke, the effect is immediate: Everybody laughs. But people also recognize that the butt is a one-trick pony. They know it can serve as a great addition to an already clever joke or humor sequence (i.e., one that uses multiple Funny Filters and good Subtext), but by itself, they will get tired of it quickly.

Amateur humor writers don't realize this fact, so they often milk the butt for as many poop and fart jokes as they can. They don't realize the returns diminish very quickly. They also don't realize that it's the butt that's the funniest thing in the universe, not pooping and farting.

Pooping is a serious gross-out reference. Those 14-year-old boys will laugh at your poop jokes, but you'll lose everyone else almost immediately.

Fart jokes are of a slightly different order. They are, in fact, the H-bomb of comedy. We all recognize the power of farts to generate laughs, and it's easy to imagine winning the war of comedy instantly and decisively by just "dropping the fart bomb on 'em," but it's worth considering what happens after an H-bomb is detonated: everything is destroyed. You can use fart jokes to get your big laughs, but once you've used the most powerful weapon in the humor arsenal, how are you going to follow it up?

Because they're so easy and so lowbrow, a lot of humor writers avoid fart jokes altogether. They consider them "too easy," the domain of amateurs.

But when comedy writers do brave the subject of the fart, they traditionally try to make the funniest possible fart joke they can. Their reason being, if they're just making fart noises to get a laugh, that's crass, but if they're harnessing the immense power of the fart, they insist on doing it masterfully, so as not to come off as taking advantage of the "easy out."

Some of the best examples of great fart jokes are Steve Martin's "farting section on airplanes" bit, *Blazing Saddles*' campfire scene, and Mr. Show's "dueling fartists."

EDGY COMEDY

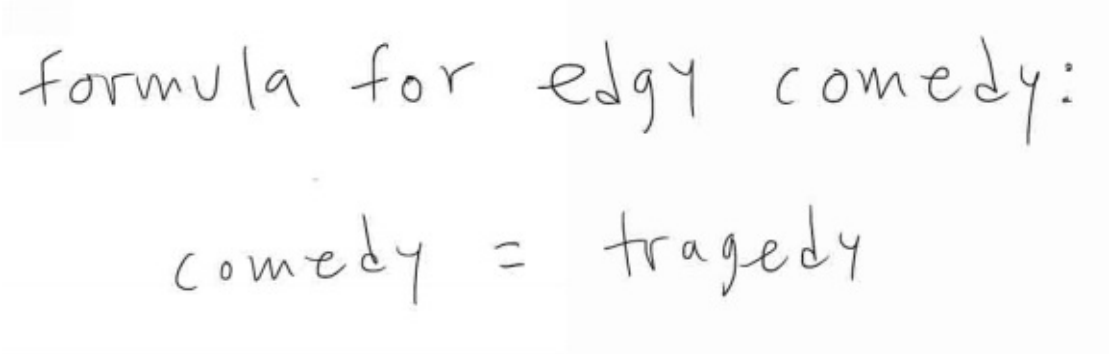
Comedy that's "edgy" is in great demand in the entertainment business. A lot of comedy writers mistakenly believe that by simply increasing the Shock value of humor, edgy comedy is achieved. This is not the case, as the unsuccessful *Movie 43* demonstrated. This movie was promoted as a dangerously edgy comedy, but contained nothing more than Shock humor (mostly gross-out) with no Subtext and certainly no moderation.

Quality edgy humor is achieved in one of three ways:

1. Using the Shock Funny Filter in moderation and with astute Subtext.

2. Decreasing the amount of time in the equation "comedy equals tragedy plus time."

3. Appearing to violate the first half of Humor-Writing Tip #10 ("Comfort the afflicted, Afflict the Comfortable"). By simply seeming to be hitting the wrong target (the afflicted), or getting tantalizingly close to doing so, all while being very careful to actually hit the right target (the comfortable), you will create edgy comedy. This is a tricky move, because if you don't manage this illusion skillfully, and instead hit the wrong target, your humor will not only be unfunny, it will be reviled.



Here are a couple of one-liners that use Shock:

"You can't fight City Hall, but you can goddamn sure blow it up."
—George Carlin

Carlin uses swearing and violence in this simple one-liner. Shock in moderation, which elucidates a very interesting Subtext: We all feel powerless and enraged when it comes to the incompetence of Government, and it's even possible to understand the rage of a terrorist, because we've all felt it, too.

Even Carlin's Subtext is shocking!

"My dick is too aware that your pussy is a chamber of financial ruin."
—Louis C. K.

Using a simple sex reference with less-than-appropriate words, Louis reveals a dark Subtext he uses a lot: relationships are ruinous, and love is a tool to get humans to reproduce, despite their best interests.

I like to think of Shock as a dash of Cayenne pepper in humor, and that's a good analogy to keep in mind when creating a Shock joke. It's usually best when there's just a hint of it, but in just the right amount, can make for some

deliciously spicy comedy.

SHOCK SUMMARY:
WHAT IT IS: Anything shocking (sex, violence, swearing, or a gross-out).
HOW TO USE IT: In extreme moderation, and always with Subtext. The more shocking the humor, the more astute the Subtext needs to be.

FUNNY FILTER 4: HYPERBOLE

Hyperbole is another word for exaggeration. Hyperbole the Funny Filter, however, is "exaggeration plus." When using Hyperbole to generate laughs, the writer needs to exaggerate not just a little, and even a lot may not do the trick. To make readers laugh with Hyperbole, the writer needs to exaggerate so greatly that the laws of science or reason are violated.

This type of comedic Hyperbole is the source of a lot of classic one-liners, the kinds of jokes Borscht Belt comedians used to tell. Rodney Dangerfield is a good example. So many of his one-liners used Hyperbole and Character. He was the guy who didn't get any respect, so one of his jokes was, "My parents didn't like me. For bathtub toys they gave me a blender and a transistor radio." Obviously, if he had played with those things in the bathtub, he'd be dead, which defies both science and reason. This joke has a dash of Shock as well, since it suggests the violent death of a child.

Hyperbole allows you to get to ridiculous extremes by exaggerating so far beyond reality that you're suddenly in a different, impossible reality. Joan Rivers was always fond of calling out Hollywood starlets for being overweight. One of her one-liners could be repurposed to apply to any target she wanted: "She's so fat she's my two best friends." It's the sheer impossibility of this Hyperbole that made it work every time she used it, in her prime. It's a textbook example of a classic Borscht Belt-style Hyperbole. By now, though, it's an old joke. So, it counts as a cliché.

Most writers think of Hyperbole instinctively as exaggerating big or exaggerating negative. It's worth noting that Hyperbole doesn't always have to go that way. You can exaggerate small, or positive, or in any direction you want. It depends on what you're trying to say with your Subtext. But in all cases, the way you use Hyperbole is to start with your Subtext, then try to exaggerate it one way or other, and see if anything funny comes of it.

Hyperbole, more than any other Funny Filter, feels like real joke-writing. When you hyperbolize well, you'll feel like you're writing professional jokes, because this is one tool professionals use a lot.

Some other one-liners using Hyperbole:

"The last time I gave a urine sample it had an olive in it."
—Rodney Dangerfield

"NRA Calls For Teachers to Keep Loaded Gun Pointed At Class for Entire School Day"
—*The Onion*

"It's so cold here in Washington, D.C., the politicians have their hands in their own pockets."
—Bob Hope

You can see how simple Hyperbole is: it's exaggerated Subtext to make a point with passion. But while it may be simple to see, Hyperbole can be very challenging to write.

The Subtext of the Rodney Dangerfield sample is "I drink too much." The Subtext of *The Onion*'s is that the NRA has an extreme view on gun rights.

The Subtext of the Bob Hope joke is that politicians are moneygrubbers. But like many of Bob Hope's jokes, it's quite sophisticated and has a lot of other things going on. (This high quality is the result of the dozens of joke writers Hope employed, quantity being the key to quality.)

He's not just using Hyperbole in this joke. He's also using Character, two layers of Irony, a second layer of Hyperbole and a few others (we'll cover them all in this chapter). The Character is the politicians, who have one trait: they always have their hands in other people's pockets. The Irony is how the politicians are acting: they're acting in the opposite way from what you'd expect. (This is called Character Irony, a standard pairing of these two Funny Filters) The second layer of Hyperbole is Metahumor (Funny Filter 11). He's using the clichéd "It's so cold here…" joke introduction, a standard set-up normally associated with a Hyperbole joke, but his Hyperbole is not impossible or beyond reason at all (politicians having their hands in someone else's pockets is quite easy, physically). However, the very fact that they're doing it in this ironic context makes its inherent non-impossibleness seem impossible, and therefore Hyperbolic, and funny.

Note also how short all of these one-liners are. There's not an unnecessary word among them.

HYPERBOLE SUMMARY:

WHAT IT IS: Exaggeration so absurd it goes beyond the bounds of science or reason.

HOW TO USE IT: Exaggerate your Subtext.

FUNNY FILTER 5: WORDPLAY

Wordplay is any kind of fun you can have with words.

Broadly speaking, the Wordplay Funny Filter covers any use of words beyond their standard meaning(s), or beyond their inherent function as words.

Specifically, Wordplay can take any number of forms: revealing double or triple meanings (entendre); making up new words; puns; word switches; the repetition of words; playing with the sounds of words. The list of named Wordplay devices is too long to recite here, but here's a short sampling of some that can make for excellent humor:

- Anagrams
- Spoonerisms
- Oxymorons
- Tongue Twisters
- Rhymes (best used in song or poetry written in verse, not in prose)
- Rebuses
- Puns

Another game of Wordplay you can play is using words that sound funny. Balloon, Thwack, Feeble, Clump, and other words that are simply fun to say or sound funny, can add an excellent note of humor to just about any joke. This technique is closely related to Funny Filter 7.

Oxymorons can be somewhat amusing if original, but be careful. "It's an oxymoron, like Military Intelligence," is a cliché that's been around for many years.

The comic strip "Family Circus" nearly pushed Malapropism out of fashion, turning the device, for a couple of generations, into a roundly ridiculed cliché used solely to reference the cute verbal slipups of toddlers, like "Pasghetti" for "Spaghetti." Malapropisms enjoyed a resurgence in the 2000s with Bushisms, which were funnier because they also employed a layer of the Character and Irony Funny Filters. (The Character: George W. Bush as the Dummy Archetype. The Irony: the Dummy is the polar opposite type of character you would want or expect in a President of the United States.)

Some established Wordplay varieties aren't funny. This could be because they've been used too much and come off as a cliché, or maybe, for whatever

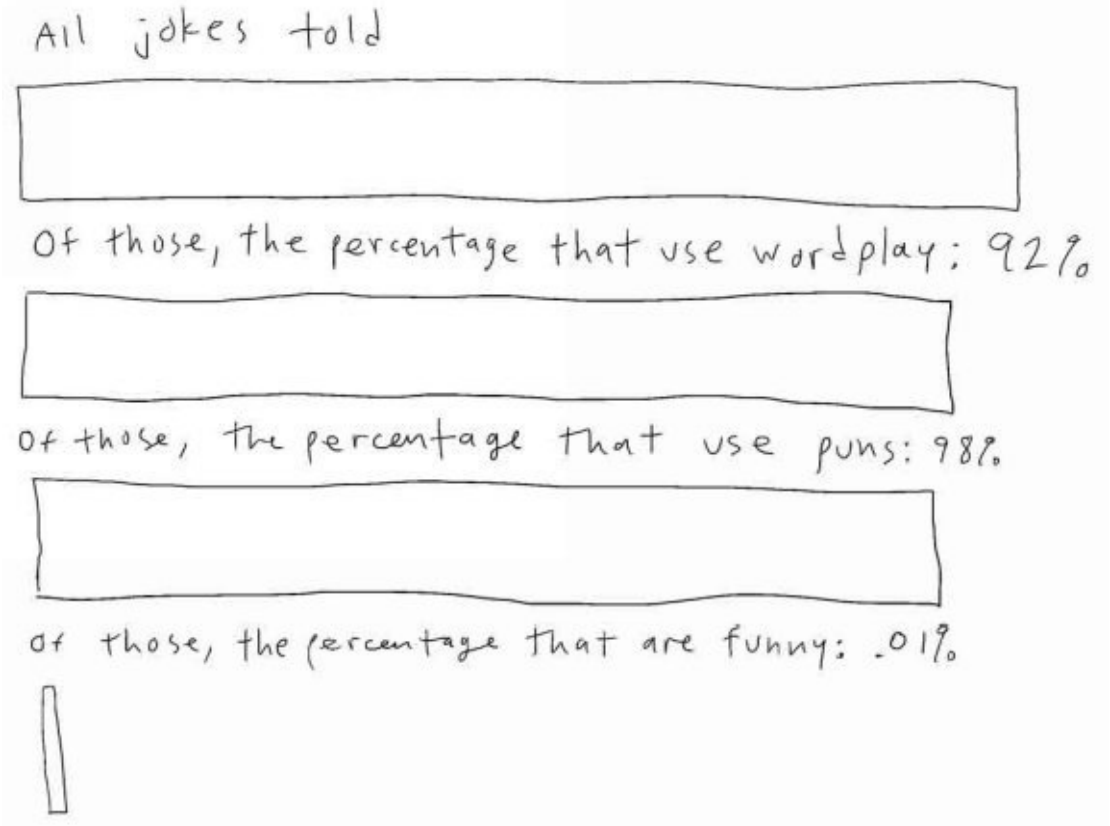
reason, they're out of fashion at the moment. They can also seem clever for cleverness's sake, and very difficult to use in service of great Subtext.

These types of Wordplay are best avoided in satirical writing:

- Alliteration
- Acronyms
- Pangrams
- Mnemonics
- Tom Swifties and Wellerisms
- Typewriter Words
- Subalphabetic Words

However, there is a way to make use of all types of Wordplay, including the "best avoided" list above, and that's by making fun of them, or deconstructing them, which we'll explore in greater depth in Funny Filter 11.

In prose writing, Wordplay is especially useful in titles, headlines and specific jokes as opposed to informing a larger structure like Irony and Character can.



Most jokes in circulation at any given time employ Wordplay, but these jokes aren't usually very funny because their Wordplay isn't crafted very well. The simplistic pun-based jokes that tend to go around aren't going to dazzle anyone.

These not-so-great jokes (“groaners”) are primarily puns with no Subtext, like, “How did the frog die? He croaked.” This type of Wordplay involving one word that has two meaning offers no additional Subtext beyond “this word has two meanings,” which is not very astute and certainly doesn’t point out any great wrong in the world.

This is the level of sophistication we typically see in children’s joke books and on Laffy Taffy packages.

Bad or simple Wordplay often only makes sense one way and not the other. In the frog example above, the joke only makes sense if you take the meaning of the word “croaked” to be “died.” It doesn’t make any sense if you take the meaning as “talked like a frog.” One simple step to improving puns is to at least make sure all meanings of the words you use make sense no matter which was you read the joke/ Example: “What did the frog say to the newspaper coupon? Rip-it.” That is only slightly less of a groaner because it at least makes sense both ways.

Making simple puns and other Wordplay devices a little more layered is one way to get started with Wordplay. Ultimately, readers want more sophistication in Wordplay, and that usually means more than just one simple pun.

The most important rule of thumb with Wordplay, and a great way to instantly give it the sophistication it needs, is to always make sure you’re working with good Subtext. None of these frog jokes above have any Subtext.

The difference, then, between a groaner and a sophisticated, genuinely funny Wordplay joke is simple: the wordplay must be used in service of astute Subtext, otherwise it will be perceived by the reader as being for the sheer sake of cleverness or cuteness, which, at best, is only mildly amusing. At worst, it’s annoying. Such baseless display is what it looks like when a writer winks at the reader, which in good Satire we never do. We always play it straight.

The Onion’s excellent story, “Fritolaysia Cuts Off Chiplomatic Relations With Snakistan,” written by Mike DiCenzo, makes use of so much wordplay that its overwhelming effect is part of the joke:

That story is rich with Subtext: Americans don’t care about turmoil in countries halfway around the world, they care about snacks—two veins of Subtext often tapped by *The Onion*.

Like Shock, good Wordplay is often no more than a garnish on humor writing. As the main thrust of the writing (again, excepting when it is used in service of good Subtext), Wordplay can feel too lightweight to actually generate sizeable laughs.

Some examples of Wordplay used in one-liners:

“I put a dollar in a change machine. Nothing changed.”
—George Carlin

“I spilled spot remover on my dog. Now he’s gone.”
—Steven Wright

“Echolocation, Echolocation, Echolocation—the 3 most important things in bat real estate.”
—me

Note that each of these jokes has Subtext. The Subtext of the first is that societal change is difficult. The second, Spot is an odd name for a dog, since it’s the same as a stain. (There’s also Shock in this one, since the dog disappeared, presumably destroyed by the spot remover.) The third, that old joke about “the three most important things in real estate” is dumb.

WORDPLAY SUMMARY:
WHAT IT IS: Paying with words in ways outside their standard definitions.
HOW TO USE IT: Only with great Subtext.

FUNNY FILTER 6: REFERENCE

Reference is perhaps the most useful of all the Funny Filters. Even more so than the ubiquitous Character. Reference is at the core of almost all humor. Most of the other Funny Filters, for example, employ a Reference at some level, and most Subtext is based on Reference.

A Reference is a relatable observation. Readers have seen, heard or otherwise experienced the thing being referenced. It makes them say, “oh, yeah, I’ve experienced that—and I didn’t know others had!” This reaction makes them laugh.

The more unique and relevant the Reference, the more sophisticated it will be perceived to be, and the more the audience it will enjoy it. The less unique or relevant the Reference, the closer you get to cliché territory.

Reference is closely related to Observational Humor, which is the observing and pointing out of the little things in everyday life that you have in common with your readers, especially things that they haven’t consciously thought about before.

But the Reference Funny Filter is broader than everyday observations. It’s a reference to any shared experience that the reader and writer have in common.

And that's what tickles the funny bone with Reference—it bonds writer and reader. When their shared experience is revealed, especially one that readers haven't heard articulated in that a particular way before, they connect with the comedy writer on a deeper level. Readers feel like the writer has some secret insight into their everyday life, which they find absolutely delightful.

Jerry Seinfeld is probably the best-known master of Reference humor. "Did you ever notice how there's always one sock missing when you do the laundry?" These kinds of mundane observations about everyday life are the foundation of his comedy, and they are all Reference. The Reference is how he begins a bit, but he quickly escalates it using Hyperbole, Wordplay, Character, or other Funny Filters.

There are gradations of Reference. The least sophisticated kind of Reference is the grade-D Reference. This is the "in-joke," where the writer tells a joke that he/she knows the very limited audience of readers are the only ones who will understand the Reference because they're familiar with the same small geographical area the writer is, yet no one outside that area would understand it. In-jokes are fun for those involved, but they're easy, and don't really have any practical application in professional comedy writing.

A grade-C Reference is the "call-back." This is a Reference to an earlier joke told in your writing or in your performance. If you write a joke, then write about other things for a while, then come back to that first joke again, it's called a "call-back." You're simply recalling or calling back that joke. This is a grade-C Reference because it's not only very easy to do, it's also a huge hit with audiences. Most stand-up routines end with a callback, usually one with some escalation, and it's a guaranteed laugh—that's why they finish with it. Watch just about any stand-up set and you'll see this tactic in action.

Humor-Writing Tip #12: Don't Fall In Love

You may think you have the greatest idea in the world, but don't fall in love with it. You may have to change it or cut it based on the feedback you get from an internal or external editor.

Humor writing is closely tied to ego. When you write something that you think is funny, it hurts when you put it out there and it doesn't work. On some level, it can feel like it wasn't just your joke that bombed, it was your inherent worth as a human being.

Amateur humor writers often have one idea that they're very proud of. This makes them immune from potentially constructive feedback, because with so much ego riding on this one idea, they can't help but take personally any critical notes they might get on it.

Professional humor writers come up with tons of ideas, and are prepared to discard any ideas that don't connect with their own internal Editor, or the opinions of people in their inner circle.

The same principle applies to brilliantly written lines in a story. If they have to be cut, cut them. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch famously said (though it's often mistakenly attributed to Mark Twain), "Murder your darlings."

Slightly more sophisticated is the grade-B Reference, which references things that are at the forefront of everyone's mind: the latest story in the 24-hour news cycle, for example, or other current event or cultural touchstone. It could be a holiday, the weather, or anything in the public consciousness. These are the go-to subjects of most late-night monologues, of course. If the current event is inherently amusing, many audiences will laugh simply at the Reference—you scarcely need to tell a joke about it. This is a relatively easy Reference because it doesn't take a lot of thought to come up with a current event, holiday, or other common Reference.

Slightly more sophisticated but still grade B (we'll call this grade B+) is a Reference to more obscure cultural tidbits that we've all experienced—modes of speech or ways of being that have become more prevalent recently. Referencing new or emerging clichés of speech is a popular form of Reference. "SNL" sketches employ this type of Reference a lot, using new yet familiar slang terms in dialog. Simon Rich, a former "SNL" writer who's written several books of short comedy essays, including the excellent collection *Ant Farm*, is especially adept at this kind of Reference. He references modes and structures of speech, conversations, social dynamics, interpersonal politics, and other loosely defined experiences we've all had. He recreates these things so perfectly that we recognize them instantly (that's how we "get" the reference), in no matter what context he uses them. He also uses several other Funny Filters, and always a killer Subtext, to expound on the Reference and create some of the best prose humor being written today.

A grade-A Reference, the most sophisticated kind, is some universal observation about life that's yet to be pointed out in exactly the same way before—a new observation about day-to-day minutia, or the way things are, or something that's wrong with the human condition. If it points out a shared weakness or universal human foible, something that you, the writer, wish could be improved, that's the core of all great Subtext and is the essence of Satire.

Most of Jerry Seinfeld's and Louis C.K.'s observational humor fit into the grade-A category, as did George Carlin's.

The Onion achieves this type of Reference humor on a daily basis.

You find Reference by observing, and writing down anything you notice that you think other people might understand or relate to. There are so many things that you can share with your reader that make good Reference humor. You just have to take notice.

Some one-liner examples of the Reference Funny Filter:

"Tip Of Man's Tongue Refuses To Relinquish Richard Crenna's Name"
—*The Onion*

"Men don't care what's on TV. They only care what else is on TV."
—Jerry Seinfeld

"Ever notice that anyone going slower than you is an idiot, but anyone going faster is a maniac?
—George Carlin

REFERENCE SUMMARY:

WHAT IT IS: Referring to something that readers will recognize from their own lives.

HOW TO USE IT: Come up with unique observations about everything from day-to-day life to broad issues about society, culture or life, and do so in a way that you don't believe anyone has done before. It might be helpful to use Jerry Seinfeld's famous "did you ever notice…?" or "What's the deal with...?" intros (in your mind only, not on the page—these are clichés) to get into the right mindset to come up with references that will connect with readers.

FUNNY FILTER 7: MADCAP

Madcap is the literary equivalent of physical humor. It's crazy, made-up words, the descriptions of slapstick, pratfalls, and other funny physical action. Absurdist references and seemingly random non sequiturs also count as Madcap.

This is where you loosen up, and really get silly. Take your readers to Loonyland, where slaphappy, cartoonish things happen, and characters become clownish.

These things are "seemingly" random because while the audience may perceive them as crazy, random, silly things, you, the writer, know that they are communicating powerful Subtext. This is the only way Madcap works in Satire. Even In Formulaic Humor, Subtext is critical for Madcap to be entertaining in

any sustained way. Without Subtext, you have silliness for silliness's sake. If it's just pie-in-the-face antics with nothing intelligent going on beneath the surface, most readers will get bored quickly.

Kids (and kids at heart) are one of the few audiences who enjoy Madcap without letup, and will even tolerate it without Subtext. The prose category of Kid Stuff is comprised largely of Madcap: pratfalls, funny faces, talking animals wearing funny hats. Pure Wackytown. The green slime of Nickelodeon is a perfect example of Madcap humor without Subtext. Kids love it. The rest of us don't see the humor in it.

Madcap is like Shock in that a little goes a long way. An otherwise calm, intelligent joke is often made a little more laugh-inducing with a pinch of Madcap. The insertion of an inherently funny-sounding word for a specific, inherently funny thing like "pants," "chimp," or "water balloon," or the clever insertion of a quick description of some over-the-top physical humor like someone falling over backwards or getting slapped in the face with a giant fish, can make all the difference in elevating a potentially drab joke into one that is more widely accessible, and actually has a chance to get a laugh.

The Continuum of Funny Filters

You may have noticed that "funny words" appears as a feature of both Wordplay and Madcap.

These 11 Funny Filters tend to blur into each other at the periphery. Some are much more closely related than others. Parody (next), for example, is really just a subset of Reference.

This chapter is not meant to be the Periodic Table of Humor Elements. These are loose definitions to describe general concepts in humor. The end goal of all of these terms and tools is not an academic one, it's practical. They're here to communicate the concepts so that you can use them intelligently to create humor, and also identify how and why your writing works or doesn't work, which is the central skill of a good inner Editor.

Steve Martin wrote a book in the 1970s called *Cruel Shoes*, which used a lot of Madcap, as did his stand-up act. *The Onion* uses Madcap on occasion, in stories like "Secretary Of Agriculture Attends Diplomatic Meeting With Foreign Cabbage." It features a photo of Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack sitting next to a big head of cabbage in an official meeting room.

It may seem purely silly, but there's Subtext in a joke like that. To me, it's that any high-level diplomatic meeting with the Secretary of Agriculture is something that I, as a typical American news consumer, couldn't care less about.

So, he may as well be meeting with a head of cabbage. Americans don't care what their government does.

Another way to interpret that story might be that our government is bloated. We have cabinet secretaries who do things and meet with people, but how is that making our lives better? It's absurd that human got along just fine doing agriculture for thousands of years before there was a Secretary of Agriculture. In other words, government is silly.

This is the beauty of Madcap. It's not only a Funny Filter that can help make any joke a little funnier, but it can serve to symbolize Subtext. Many times, the Subtext in a joke that uses primarily Madcap is, "[Such and such] is absurd," or, "[Such and such] is ridiculous," or, "[Such and such] is crazy." The choice of Madcap as a Funny Filter communicates this kind of Subtext beautifully.

Since Madcap is concerned with physical humor, it's worth mentioning some examples from TV and movies, since they can shed light on how to best use Madcap in prose.

The Three Stooges and Jerry Lewis are known for their Madcap physical humor, but they rarely had meaningful Subtext. So, their humor was very unsophisticated. The Marx Brothers, on the other hand, used Madcap to great effect, most notably in their classic "Duck Soup." By treating the serious matter of international relations to a full-on assault of crazy Madcap humor, they were, in effect, saying, "the world is a crazy place," which is such simple, beautiful Subtext, it makes all their silliness funny in a profound and fulfilling way.

No one did Madcap better than Monty Python. Their "Ministry of Silly Walks" sketch is a Madcap classic that says, "Government bureaucracy is lunacy." Their "Election Night Special" is a brilliant parody of election-night news coverage. It features returns coming in from various precincts, and the two parties getting most of the votes are the Sensible Party and the Silly Party. It starts silly, but when the mainstream Silly Party candidate gets a challenge from the fringe, the "Very Silly Party," they really let loose the craziness. It's a masterpiece of Madcap, and has aged extremely well. After almost half a century, this political sketch is still as relevant as today's headlines, especially when compared to American elections.

"Seinfeld" is one of the most sophisticated sitcoms that's ever been on TV. Most TV sitcoms rely on little more than Character, and occasionally Hyperbole, but that's about all. "Seinfeld" used those plus Wordplay, Shock, and most of the other 11. Where the show really excelled was in its expert use of Madcap. The complicated, tightly constructed plots and sophisticated Character, Hyperbole and Wordplay humor alone could have come across as dense and more intellectual than fun. But as soon as Kramer came bounding into the scene,

pratfalling and making funny faces, the proper balance was struck, and the tone of the show was expertly tuned for maximum laughs. The show used Madcap as a garnish, and always in service of the Subtext that came out of the various, interwoven plots.

Here are some one-liner examples of Madcap:

Racist Figurines March On Washington

—*The Onion*

"Here's something you don't often see" (makes a funny face and jumps up and down)

—Steve Martin

"My biggest comedy influences are an elderly woman and a recently mopped staircase."

—Dan Guterman

The Subtext is clear in the first and third examples. *The Onion*'s is that mass marches on Washington are futile, and Guterman's is using grade-A Metahumor (Funny Filter 11) to comment on the very nature of comedy. But what about Steve Martin? It seems at first glance like it's just a funny face and a physical stunt. But it's not. So much of what Steve Martin did, from his persona to the majority of his jokes, mocked the idea of show business and entertainment. His whole act was meta, with such meaty Subtext that it did no less than help define the ironic tone that dominated the entertainment industry for the later quarter of the 20th century.

One watchword worth noting about Madcap: Beware of clichés. A lot of classic Madcap was so successful for so long that everyone used it, and many people still use it, and these are the worst of the worst clichés. I'm talking about things like banana peels, rubber chickens, Groucho glasses, and other standard comedy props. These things stopped being funny decades ago. They're not funny anymore. So, don't go anywhere near them!

MADCAP SUMMARY:

WHAT IT IS: Silly slapstick, inherently goofy items, non sequiturs, wacky words.

HOW TO USE IT: Make sure it serves (and even symbolizes) your Subtext. Works as the main thrust of a joke, but also a very effective garnish.

FUNNY FILTER 8: PARODY

Parody is making fun of another entertainment or information product. Any piece of writing, type of presentation, or anything intended to be presented to the public in any medium can be the target of Parody. That means anything from a specific TV show, movie, book, magazine, or anything—all the way down to a church pamphlet, bus schedule or street sign. Media can be parodied, like movies, the stage or visual art. Specific authors or creators or voices can be parodied.

Parody works best if readers are familiar with the work or medium being parodied. Not too many people may understand your brilliant parody of Inuit song duels. But if it's a more commonly experienced format or medium, or a popular or at least reasonably well-known specific entertainment product, you can parody it and be assured people will get it.

The Onion parodies a news website, and the AP style used in most newswriting, and they do so in just about every article they publish. *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* web comic and books parody, of course, a diary. Ian Frazier won the Thurber Prize for American Humor largely because of his brilliant piece, "Coyote v. Acme," which parodies both the Road Runner cartoons and a modern legal brief.

You parody something by mimicking its format, voice, or anything about it that calls it clearly to mind for your reader.

Parody is a powerful tool in humor. Readers will often laugh before they've even read any of your words—they'll merely see the context of your Parody (a design, presentation, or other framing device) that calls to mind the specific thing you're parodying, and that alone will amuse them greatly. You can see this phenomenon in action on "SNL" whenever they parody a popular movie. As soon as the lights come up on the set and the audience recognizes the movie's likeness, they laugh. They laugh even harder when a cast member appears, looking very much like a key character in the movie. Before a single word of dialog is spoken, the audience is already laughing. This is how effective Parody can be.

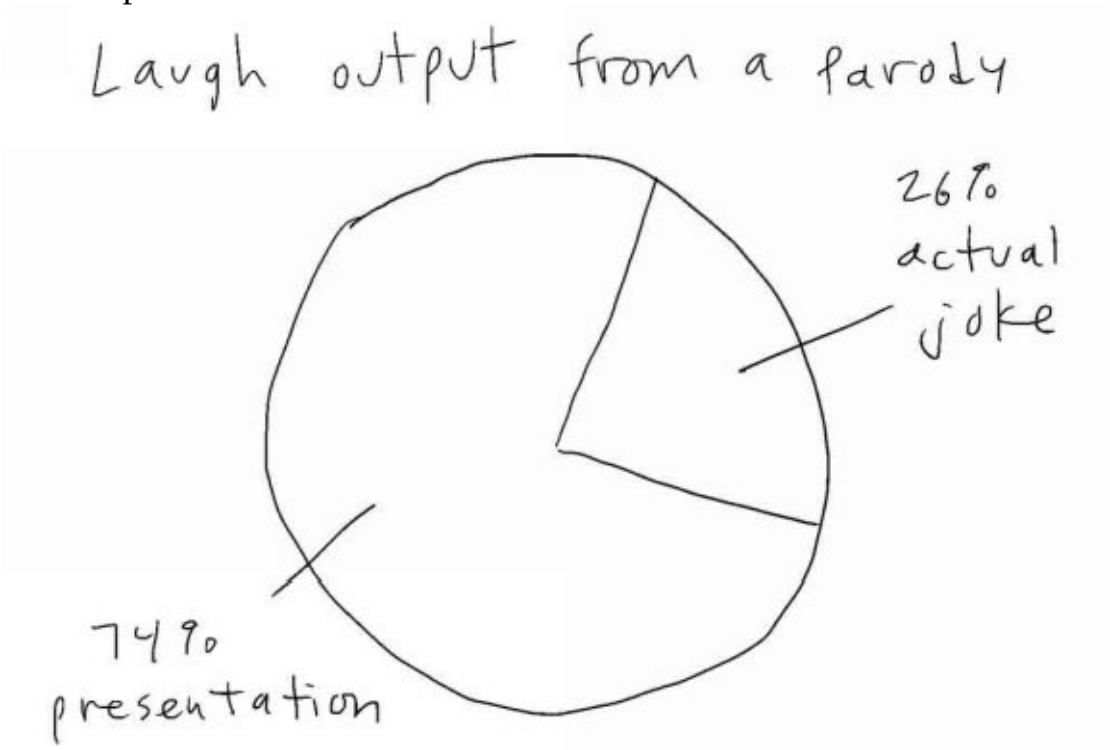
Humor-Writing Tip #13: Put the Funny Part Last

A joke usually works best when the reveal, or the funny word or the funny detail—the funniest part of the joke—comes last. Often, when you're assessing whether a joke works, you might notice the funny part is at the beginning or the middle. Try moving it as close to the end as possible. That often makes it funnier.

With Parody, you accomplish two things. First, as with the other Funny Filters, you elucidate whatever Subtext you want. Second, you provide a kind of second Subtext—your opinion of whatever it is you're parodying. For maximum comic effect with Parody, the medium becomes the message.

In the examples above, Parody is used both to convey Subtext and lampoon the medium. For example, most stories in *The Onion* have their own Subtext, like, for example, a story about the government might have the time-honored Subtext, "our government is incompetent." But on top of that they're also excoriating modern journalism through their parody of it. This second layer of hidden meaning has very little to do with the core Subtext of the article. It casts a larger net, asking readers to question everything they read in the news.

In "Coyote v. Acme," Frazier casts a ridiculously logical light on *Looney Toons*. On top of that, he indicts our litigious society with his parody of the legal brief. His piece is brimming with Subtext: commenting on the ridiculous nature of children's entertainment, the pervasiveness of liability claims, as well as weak consumer protections.



There's one simple rule to using Parody. The writing or the design, format or framing device of the writing, must mirror the thing being parodied as closely as possible. This is what readers love about Parody; they like to see how close you can get it. If you're parodying another writer's style, you must get it right down to every syllable and punctuation mark. If you don't, if your Parody is half-

baked, it won't be as funny.

Obviously, you don't want to mimic the content as closely as possible. That's the new and different element you bring to the table. You want to mimic only the form or format of your target. This might be the way it looks, the way it sounds, other quirks about it, or all of the above.

Note how *The Onion* perfectly apes AP style in its newswriting. Note how Frazier gets every little phrase of his legal brief just right, so it sounds exactly like a real legal brief. Jeff Kinney uses the tone, syntax and even a hand-written font that makes his books look exactly like a kid's diary.

Readers love good verisimilitude—when Parody comes eerily close to the original. Verisimilitude is everything in Parody. The closer the resemblance, the better.

A lot of humor writers think they can succeed with Parody by going half-way, and getting the mimicry close enough. This may work, and will result in some people finding it amusing. But in order to make your work accessible to the widest possible audience, go all the way with Parody. Play it straight, and don't wink at the reader. This elevates your work to a kind of hoax, where those not in the know may actually be fooled into thinking what you've created is the real thing, which happens all the time to *The Onion*, and there isn't much that's funnier or more satisfying for the writer and readers who are in on the joke.

How do you write Parody in a single line or joke? Think of other writing that is a similar size: a fortune cookie, a horoscope, a weather forecast, a newspaper headline or a tweet. There are so many. By borrowing a format like these and mimicking it so closely that everyone who reads it knows what you're referring to, you harness the satirical power of the Parody Funny Filter.

Some Parody one-liner examples (from me):

• The least scary man-turning-into-insect movie: *The Human Lady Bug*

• They should make an app that has car-trip games like License Plate ABCs, but instead of looking out the window you look at your phone.

• Book: *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Being a Complete Idiot*

PARODY SUMMARY:

WHAT IT IS: Aping another entertainment or information format or specific presentation.

HOW TO USE IT: Use verisimilitude. Make your Parody look or sound as much like the real thing as possible.

FUNNY FILTER 9: ANALOGY

Analogy is the comparing of two different things and finding their similarities. The two things should be very different—opposites are especially good, and you must be many similarities. It's finding these connections between the two things and making the reader aware of them that makes Analogy funny.

Analogy, like Parody, is slightly more complex than the other Funny Filters. It provides another "hidden secret" in your writing. The secret in Analogy is the half of your Analogy that you keep veiled.

When you compare two things in an Analogy, you only want to overtly reveal one of them to the reader. The other is only alluded to, and readers are invited to add two and two to think of it on their own, thanks to your clues. This is an easier hidden nugget to discover than Subtext—it has to be discovered more quickly—but it is hidden all the same. If you mention it in your literal text, your joke falls apart, just as if you had mentioned your Subtext.

George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is a great work of Analogy. The two things being compared are animals on a farm and the Russian Revolution. The animals on the farm is the side of the Analogy that's explained and revealed overtly. The Russian Revolution is the secret side. At no point does Orwell break character and say, "You realize this is really about the Russian Revolution, right?" If he did, it would all fall apart. He must play it straight, and never show his hand.

One of the great achievements of *Animal Farm* is that readers in the know will enjoy the secret half of the Analogy, but readers who don't recognize it will still enjoy an incredibly engaging book about political intrigue among funny talking animals on a farm. This greatly increases the work's accessibility. It's a far more popular book than it would have been if he had written it without the Analogy Funny Filter, and simply analyzed the Russian Revolution and its key players.

But there's still more hidden meaning: the Subtext. So, the two primary hidden messages in *Animal Farm*: (1) "these animals represent the Russian Revolution"—that's the secret half of the Analogy. And (2) "power corrupts"—that's the Subtext. The two are not the same, but they are related, and one serves the other.

You can use Analogy in an entire work of fiction, like Orwell, or you can use it in the space of a comedic article, like one of my favorites from *The Onion*: "Al Gore Places Infant Son In Rocket To Escape Dying Planet."

The Onion uses Analogy a lot. Congress is compared to a schoolyard, classroom or garage band. Romantic relationships are compared to workplace relationships. The list goes on and on. Analogy does not always have to be

complex. It can be extremely simple and still be effective.

Whether it's executed in a complex, long-form work like a novel, or a simple one-line joke, Analogy must always be used the same way: the two things being compared must be very different; one of them must be revealed literally while the other must be kept secret; and you must make the reader aware of as many points of comparison as possible between the two. Each instant that calls to mind the hidden side of the Analogy creates a joke beat in your writing.

Examples of Analogy jokes:

"Being a screenwriter in Hollywood is like being a eunuch at an orgy. Worse, actually, at least the eunuch is allowed to watch."

—Albert Brooks

"Trying to skip past the FBI warning on DVDs is the new finding shelter."

—me

Steve Martin's farting-smoking bit is a classic Analogy:

"No, do you mind if I fart? It's one of my habits. Yeah, they've got a special section for me on airplanes now. I quit once for a year, you know, but I gained a lot of weight. After sex I really have the urge to light one up."

ANALOGY SUMMARY:

WHAT IT IS: The comparing of two disparate things and finding as many comparisons as possible.

HOW TO USE IT: Keep one of the two parts of the Analogy "behind the curtain," while the other is laid bare. Every time you make a connection between the two that the reader recognizes, that's a joke.

FUNNY FILTER 10: MISPLACED FOCUS

This is a Funny Filter in which the writer focuses on something other than the Subtext, but something related to it, maybe a small thing just to the side of it, or a lesser-known aspect of it, so as to surreptitiously direct the reader's attention to the main idea by way of glaring omission.

Subtext, like always, is never openly stated. When you pretend to be unaware of your Subtext, it's like you have Myopia, and can't see the Elephant in the Room. Instead, you're intently focusing your attention on either the wrong thing, or that something that doesn't matter.

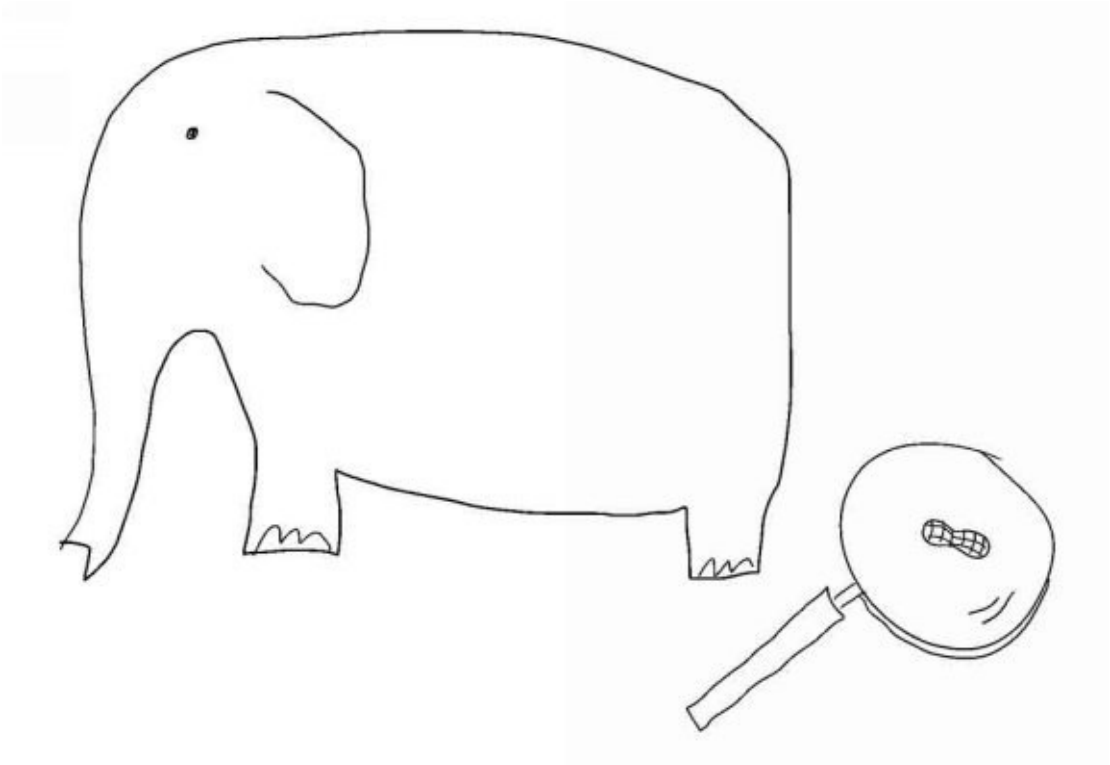
You can stir up a pretend sense of righteous indignation in the reader with

Misplaced Focus. This works best with Subtext that's going to elicit a strong opinion from people, something very wrong with the world that readers not only know about—many of them care deeply about it, or are angry about it.

By using Misplaced Focus, you can rattle the reader's cage about a serious issue, and make them fume that something horrible is wrong with the world (expressed by your Subtext), and you are not only not doing anything about it, not only ignoring it, you don't even notice it!

Pretending to lack of awareness of an important issue is fun for the reader, and a very simple trick. It's you playing the dope, and it's widely accessible because it works for all ages, depending on the complexity of your Subtext.

Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" uses this technique to focus not on solving the problem of Ireland's poor children, but on the fake solution of eating them. While laughing at the absurdity with which Swift focuses his great argumentative powers on this wrong-headed solution, the reader is compelled to realize how tragic it is that there are so many Irish kids living in abject poverty, and makes them want to ask, Why is no one doing anything about it? This, of course, is his Subtext. His seeming dismissal of the main issue (child poverty) in favor of his singular focus on this terrible idea for solving the problem (eating the children) inflames our righteous indignation.



Like Analogy and Parody, Misplaced Focus can provide a second hidden message in Satire beyond the Subtext: the Elephant in the Room. Often the

Elephant in the Room is the Subtext, but sometimes it's not—it can also be a mere a prop that's serving to elucidate your Subtext.

The Onion uses Misplaced Focus frequently. In the story, "Secondhand Smoke Linked to Secondhand Coolness," they bring to mind the dangers of secondhand smoke

When this story was published in the mid 1990s, authorities still argued about whether secondhand smoke was bad for people's health, and very few actual bans had been enacted into law (outside California). Cigarette companies certainly didn't think secondhand smoke was so bad. People on both sides of the issue felt passionately about secondhand smoke. This story created laughter by inflaming those passions, focusing not on the real issue, but misplacing the focus onto something tangentially related, and far less important.

One more one-liner example of Misplaced Focus is this one, which came from Annie Goodson, one of my students at The Second City:

"Mother of dead teen has no one to update her to the new iOS."

It's textbook Misplaced Focus, because it focuses on the Mother's need to update her phone instead of on the much more important matter of the death of her son.

MISPLACED FOCUS SUMMARY:

WHAT IT IS: A pretend lack of awareness of an obvious fact, brought to light by focusing on the wrong thing.

HOW TO USE IT: Think of something related to your Subtext but far less important. Then draw readers' attention to it, indirectly causing readers to think of your Subtext. It's like saying, "Don't think of a Pink Elephant."

FUNNY FILTER 11: METAHUMOR

Metahumor makes fun of other humor or the idea of humor, either by describing the effect of humor, using humor itself as a subject in a joke, or targeting a humor medium or specific attempt at humor.

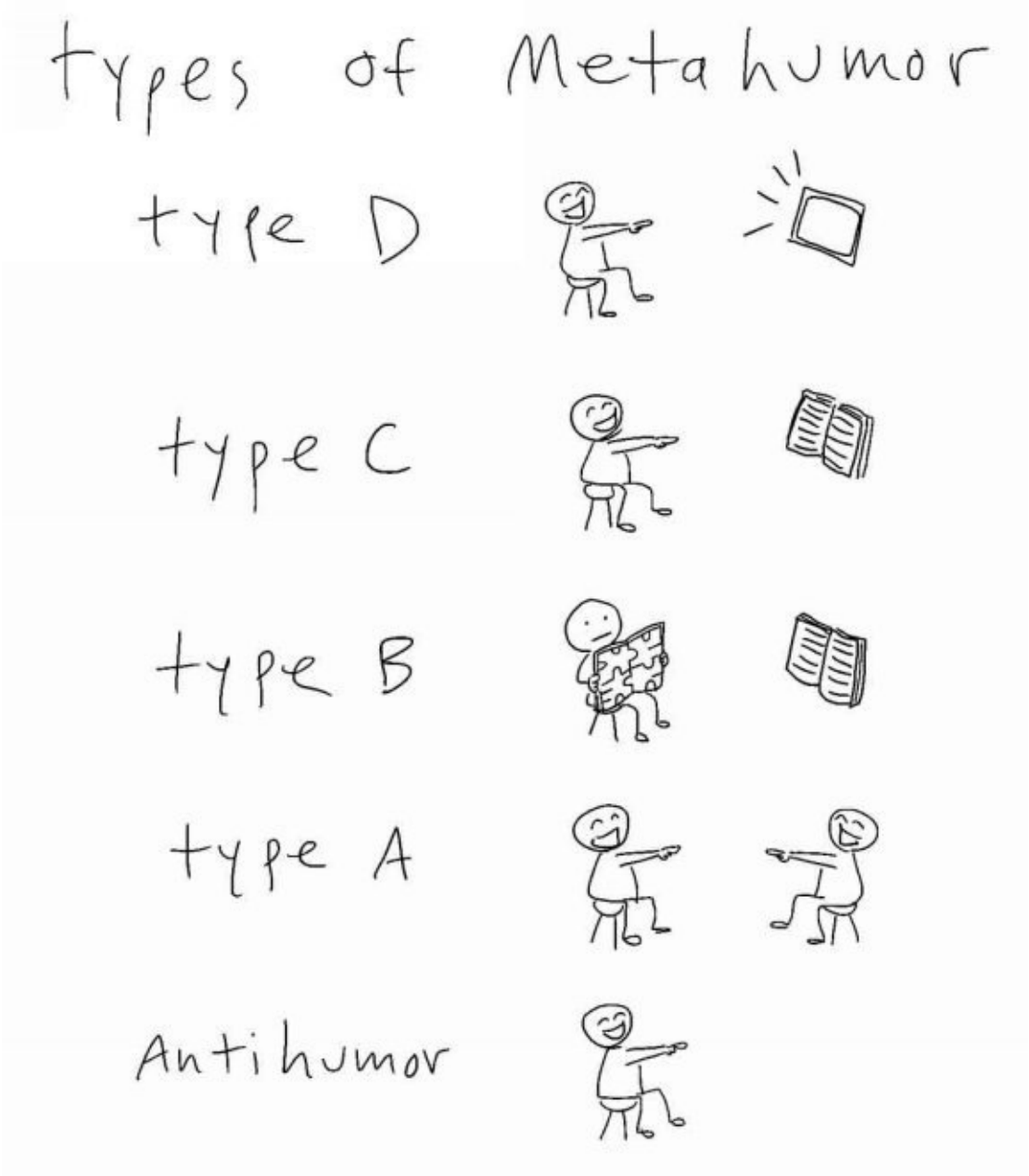
Metahumor can have a tendency to appeal only to comedy nerds or insiders. So, an effort must be made to make it accessible to a wider audience if it's going to succeed.

If you've ever criticized a comedy performance, or wanted to mock a professional comedian or comedy writer or comedy production's attempt to be funny, or if you've ever wondered what humor is, and why people express it,

you have the makings of Subtext for a Metahumor joke.

There are several levels of difficulty and sophistication in Metahumor:

The most sophisticated Metahumor (type A) mocks the concept of humor itself, finding absurdity in the fact that humans laugh at things. Type-A Metahumor is rare, and has a tendency to be a little esoteric for most readers, but if it can be made accessible, it can be revelatory. The humor most people encounter in popular entertainment is Character, Hyperbole, and a maybe a little bit of Wordplay. So, an extra layer of surprise awaits the average reader who's unaccustomed to this kind of high-level humor.



The next most sophisticated kind of Metahumor (type B) intellectually

deconstructs comedy with no emotion or laughter. To plainly state the effect of humor without any razzle-dazzle can be very amusing to people. It evokes the Robot Archetype, or Straight Man. This is a character who reacts with far less emotion than situations warrant. (The Blues Brothers are a perfect example.) When a writer deconstructs humor in this way—like I'm doing in this book, for example—can, at times, come off as funny, especially when the humor being analyzed is outrageously silly or shocking, like when I broke down the effect of farting and pooping jokes.

Slightly less sophisticated is type-C Metahumor, which openly derides well-respected comedy media, products, personalities, or clichés (or soon-to-be clichés) still in wide use, even by the comedically savvy. Targeting other people's perfectly respectable humor effort might be as simple as holding up a reputable comedic performance or piece of writing to some justifiable ridicule. When attempting this type of Metahumor, it's important that Humor-Writing Tip #9 ("Comfort the Afflicted, Afflict the Comfortable") be observed. You want to be careful not to mock an earnest beginner, or someone who might likely be crushed by such criticism. That's an undeserving target.

Writers embarking on type-C Metahumor need to be supremely confident in their own comedic ability before they can make a joke that involves tearing down someone else's legitimate attempt at humor. So, this takes some experience and some guts. It has to be done well or it will fall on its face.

The least sophisticated kind of Metahumor (type D) mocks comedy that's generally considered unsophisticated, or humor clichés that are no longer in vogue. These are the easy targets, like bad sitcoms, lowest-common-denominator Kid Stuff, and the like. Writers of type-D Metahumor might be getting easy laughs, but they're not making any kind of particularly daring statement.

(These different types, by the way, are just a description the different ways this Funny Filter can be used. They're not a quality rating. The higher the "grade" letter, the more sophisticated the joke and the higher the level of difficulty in creating it. But that doesn't mean perfectly funny jokes can't be written using any and all of these different types of Metahumor.)

Metahumor happens frequently in casual conversation. When we comment on a poor joke we've made, or someone else's poor joke, we do this to try to salvage a laugh from a failed attempt at humor. Late-night talk-show hosts do the same thing. If a monologue joke bombs, the comedian/host has a second chance to wring a laugh from the situation by becoming aware of the joke's failure, and commenting on it. Audiences love self-depreciating Metahumor (the shared fear response of the entertainer's flop sweat is a strong motivator), so they're usually

poised to be entertained by just about any reaction to a failed joke.

Steve Martin used a lot of Metahumor in his stand-up performances, mockingly referring to his act as “hilarious comedy jokes.” In *Cruel Shoes* he used Metahumor in his piece, “Comedy Events You Can Do.”

Humor-Writing Tip #14: There’s Only One Rule in Comedy

Once you try your hand at humor writing, you realize it’s extremely difficult to do well. We can sometimes feel overwhelming when we take to heart what our peers, be they other comedy writers or well-meaning critics, tell us about what we’re doing, what we should be doing or how we could be doing it better. I realize books like this one can contribute to this kind of anxiety. Comedy writers hear a lot of dos and don’ts, which can stir up a lot of doubts. How do we stay focused on creating good comedy?

Just remember that there’s only one rule: If they laugh, it’s funny.

It doesn’t help anyone to get overwhelmed. If you ever feel that way, and have trouble coming up with funny ideas as a result, step away from the keyboard and forget about it for a while. Do something fun. When you come back to writing, remember that the goal there is the same. Readers just want to have fun. They want to laugh. If you can make them laugh—no matter how you’re doing it—you’re doing it right.

Metahumor in a simpler form can be added to other jokes or scenes. For example, not being able to tell a joke well is a funny trait to give a character. This was done with Marlin, Nemo’s dad in *Finding Nemo*. This was also ironic because he’s a Clown Fish, so you (and the other fish) might expect that he’d be great at telling a joke. There’s an additional layer of both Irony and Metahumor in this trait because he’s voiced by Albert Brooks, a comic mastermind of the highest order.

A subset of Metahumor is Antihumor, in which the absence of humor becomes funny. If the context is right, and readers are expecting something funny, but the opposite—something unfunny or the lack of anything funny—happens instead, this can also be very funny.

Antihumor is not for everyone. It can actually anger as many people as it entertains, so it’s a tool best used with caution. When an audience expects humor but gets an overt lack of humor, they can sometimes feel betrayed. However, for those who appreciate Antihumor, it’s an incredibly powerful tactic, and has the makings of cult appeal.

Andy Kaufman was well known for using anti-humor in his stand-up performances, like when he read *The Great Gatsby* on stage instead of telling

jokes. I myself employed anti-humor in my daily comic strip "Jim's Journal."

Here are more examples of Metahumor, in the form of short one-liners:

"Viagra Giving Hope To Thousands Of Struggling Stand-Up Comedians"

—*The Onion*

"My body has no sexual meaning anymore, but if I can make people laugh with it, at least it's being used."

—Louis C.K.

"My email was hacked but the guy was funnier so I left it alone."

—Albert Brooks

METAHUMOR SUMMARY:

WHAT IT IS: Stepping back and making humor itself the subject or target of the joke.

HOW TO USE IT: Metahumor works best with Subtexts having to do with humor, but can also be used as a garnish as part of another joke.

CHAPTER 6 ACTION STEP:

Every Day for 10 days, write 10 funny one-liners, jokes, or funny titles for stories using each of the 11 Funny Filters. On the first day, try to write 10 ironic jokes, on the second, 10 Character jokes, and so on. Put yourself in Clown mode so you can produce your ideas quickly and easily. They may not be good, but that's okay. This is just practice.

7: USING THE FUNNY FILTERS

I don’t like to work alone. It’s much easier to riff off ideas with a partner or a group or writers. The comedy bubbles up beautifully when heads come together, and the end result is usually far better than when I laboriously crank out material on my own. Besides, it’s a lot of fun to sit around with other funny people and make each other laugh.

Before you can succeed in a group, however, it’s a good idea to be a top performer in your own right. If you’re not, you may be using a partner or group as a crutch. It’s easy to rely on the energy of others to make up for your weaknesses as a comedy writer. And this isn’t really fair to the others. When you become a solid joke creator in your own right, you become a more valuable contributor to a writing team. That’s why I recommend focusing first on sharpening your own saw, so you can produce great work when you’re sitting alone with your pad and pen. Then, and only then, jump into a comedy-writing team.

When you’re at your personal best, you’ll raise the bar for everyone else. A group of individuals who are each operating at a heightened skill level is exponentially better at generating funny satirical writing than a group of mediocre writers using each other as a crutch.

There are a lot of other nuances and best practices for leveraging the power of a writer’s room, but that will have to wait for another book. The intent here is to focus on your own performance.

In this chapter I’m going to illustrate three methods you can use to write funny lines on your own. Once you have writing partners or a group, there are other methods available. For now, there are three methods:

Method 1: Filtering. This is when you start with Subtext, then filter it through one or more Funny Filters to make a joke. This is the most mechanical, reverse-engineered method.

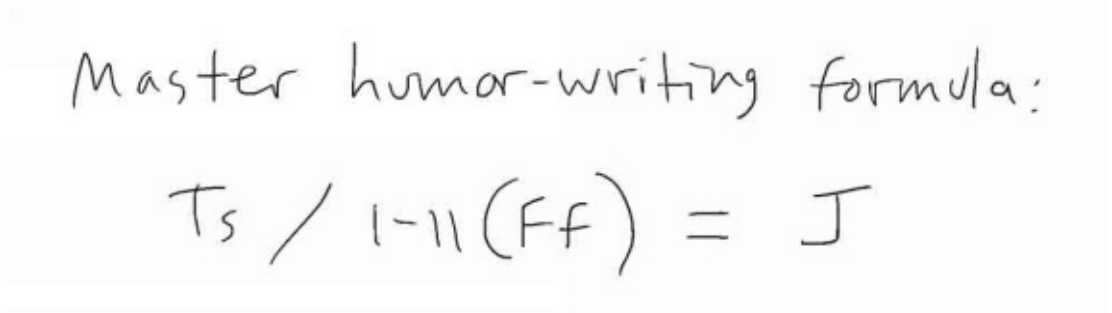
Method 2: Finessing. This is starting with a joke, or something resembling a joke, like a funny idea that came to you in a flash of inspiration, then refining and finessing it using your awareness of the importance of Subtext, and how the Funny Filters work.

Method 3: Divining. With no ideas and no notes, this is using the Funny Filters by themselves to drum up something funny out of nothing.

In all these methods, the core formula is the same. We are looking for Subtext reinterpreted through one or more Funny Filters. That’s what creates a joke.

These methods may seem clunky and mechanical at first, if you don’t have

much experience writing humor. You may have thought writing humor would be fun, filled with inspiration and laughs.



The media often portrays comedy writing, and other kinds of creative work, as a fun and easy process, but that's not how it works. Writing comedy is a slog. I've never encountered any comedy writer who didn't recognize this unfortunate fact of the profession. If it were easy, we'd all be Tina Fey.

In time, and with practice, these methods will feel less mechanical. If practiced enough, they'll start to feel like instinct, or at least a well-honed skill.

I'm going to go through the thought process of these three methods, exploring various ideas in order to demonstrate how a comedy writer thinks while crafting a joke. We're "live" here. I didn't prepare or vet any ideas for this chapter to make sure they were funny beforehand. I'm going to work off the cuff to give you a more honest portrayal of how this looks.

By demonstrating these processes this way, I hope to also show you Humor-Writing Tip #2 ("Quantity is the Key to Quality") in action. Not all of my ideas are going to be good. In fact, I may not even have a winner when this chapter is over. There might only be a couple of potential ideas to come of it—if that—ones that I'll have to revisit later to see if I can punch them up. But that's all anyone can reasonably expect. No one spews comedy gold—there's a lot of junk that comes out. The trick is to keep spewing junk, and try to recognize the things that look less like junk and more like gold.

I've known and worked with a lot of comedy writers, and one thing I know is that while everyone's brain works differently, there are certain fundamental things we all have to do. Everyone has their own way they like to work, whether based on superstition or proven results, but all comedy writers, regardless of their work preferences, ultimately have to put words down, and these three methods are very basic ways to approach this central task of writing humor.

METHOD 1: FILTERING

Turning your Subtext into an idea that's going to make people laugh will take some trial and error and experimentation. Let's go through an example of how

this might look.

If you've been carrying your notebook around for a few days, like I have, you probably have a few random thoughts written down. Or maybe you feel like sifting back through some Morning Pages you remember being especially fruitful. Either way, in that pile of chaff let's say you find the observation, "Meeting an alien from another planet would be great and all that, but it probably wouldn't be very smart. In fact, it's probably just a dumb germ," which I just found in my notebook. Could this make for the Subtext of a joke? Let's see.

It has a clear subject-verb-object structure, and expresses a simple opinion. So, yes, this can work as Subtext. It's not pointing out any human folly or universal injustice (except maybe the injustice of a dumb alien being a let-down after all the anticipation the human race has shown for meeting the first outer-space alien), but that's okay. For now, we only let amusement be our guide, and I find this thought somewhat amusing.

First, let's make sure we have our Clown hat on. We're trying to drum up some funny ideas here, so this is no place for the Editor.

Humor-Writing Tip #15: One Impossible Thing at a Time

When you create a joke, you create a comedy universe in which something is either a little askew from reality, or you create a heightened reality in which one key idea is highlighted. In either case, with any joke, you can only have one "crazy" idea, or one impossible thing, per joke. If you try to give them two, your readers will end up confused. If we're going to laugh easily and freely, one comedic concept at a time is all we can handle.

We could try filtering the idea through the Character Funny Filter. The way the Character Funny Filter works is that we create a character with 1–3 simple traits, then have that character act on those traits, and this creates a joke. So, we can invent an alien character who's really stupid. Every time this character does something dumb, it will be funny. This tack happens to make use of the classic comedic Archetype, the Dummy.

If we try the Irony Funny Filter we'll write the opposite of the Subtext, in this case, "aliens are super smart." This is nothing new. So, Irony probably won't work with this idea.

See how my Editor brain jumped in there? I don't want it to do that. As soon as I start judging my ideas negatively, I'm limiting my creativity. So, I'm going to continue exploring Irony.

Heightening contrast is essential in Irony, so simply writing about how an

alien microbe is “very smart” isn’t going to be enough. We want to heighten it as much as possible. Alien microbes should be educated, given the right to vote, or run for office. They’re taking over Mensa. (Here we’re also employing Hyperbole, continuing to exaggerate the alien’s smarts to beyond the point of reason.) Perhaps there’s a *Flowers for Algernon* story to be told about an alien germ who becomes a beloved super-genius. Now it’s reminding me of *E.T.*

There’s my Editor brain again. I want to compare my ideas to things that have come before, but not at this stage. At this stage I just want a free flow of creativity. I want to stay focused, pour out ideas, and worry about whether they’re good later, and if they’re too similar to something that’s already been done, they can be axed later. For now it’s grist for the mill, and will all get worked out when it comes time to assess these jokes.

We could try Parody, and use a knowing reference to *E.T.* to make this idea funnier. A boy could meet and become friends with a super-smart microbe. And realize, too, that any time you’re dealing with a talking animal or smart inanimate object (like a microbe), you’re also using the Madcap Funny Filter.

When a lot of Funny Filters start piling up like that, it usually means something good might be happening. You’ll want to continue in this vein.

The essential guideline for Parody is that you want to mimic the form you’re parodying as faithfully as possible, without winking at the reader. So, we’re going to write about a very touching love story between a boy and his pet microbe from outer space.

> In a real-life version of *E.T.*, a local boy bonded with an empathic microbe from outer space, then died.

The smart-alien angle was feeling too far afield from my original Subtext, which I liked, so I went back to the alien being dumb and just acting in accordance with how a microbe would act (using the Character Funny Filter). I also added the Shock humor of the boy dying, which made sense given that’s what would probably happen in this case.

Can we do anything to make this idea more relevant? How about any Reference humor? What do people know about aliens or, more specifically, alien microbes? They probably don’t know much. I think they know what people would do if such an alien were discovered: they’d plaster its picture on the cover of Time Magazine and it might he toasted as a celebrity. This could work, because it might be funny to see that happen to something that’s really dumb.

> Alien Microbe Meets With President in Historic Intergalactic Summit

This one came out in the form of a headline, which is fine. There's a good amount of Madcap there, which I always enjoy. But Let's not forget to put the funny part last.

> In Historic Intergalactic Summit, President Meets With Alien Microbe

Let's try Misplaced Focus and see what happens. Instead of focusing on the alien, let's focus on the wrong thing, something smaller and less important that discovering alien life.

> Now that science has discovered alien microbes, many Earth microbes are concerned about their job security

This also involved a little Wordplay with the double meaning of "aliens."

So, I'm feeling pretty lukewarm on this track. The main issue I'm running into is that I don't know if the wider public realizes alien microbes might have been discovered, and that's kind of important, because the whole joke could hinge on their awareness of that. Also, these microbes were discovered a few years ago, so it's totally irrelevant.

That's not to say jokes have to be timely and relevant. I, for one, usually favor evergreen jokes that will be funny for years to come. But it's difficult to make one of those when your subject matter involves a specific news event.

I'll set these aside and look at them in a few days and see if I think they're any good. I can't possibly have any objectivity about them now, after having just written them.

A couple of these attempts are under 140 characters, so I could tweet them if I wanted. A lot of comedy writers do that as soon as they write jokes, and I think that's great. As for me, I like to let them sit first. At this point, for all I know, the jokes might be awful—I don't trust my Clown brain, or even my Editor brain at this stage, because I'm too close to this joke. Worse yet, I might discover later that my joke is identical to a joke someone else came up with earlier, in which case I'll have to scrap mine. So, before I tweet anything I always Google keywords and see if there's been something similar.

Another example:

Let's say you had in your notes the observation, "It's funny how bus drivers wave at each other like comrades when they pass each other on the street while driving their busses."

This idea isn't inherently funny as is, but could be Subtext for a joke. If we

create a bus-driver Character who has one or two simple traits, it's on its way to becoming funny.

Let's say our bus driver is mean, hates everyone on the bus, and hates his life.

But we have to be careful with—that's a cliché, the same bus-driver character we've seen in countless movies and TV shows.

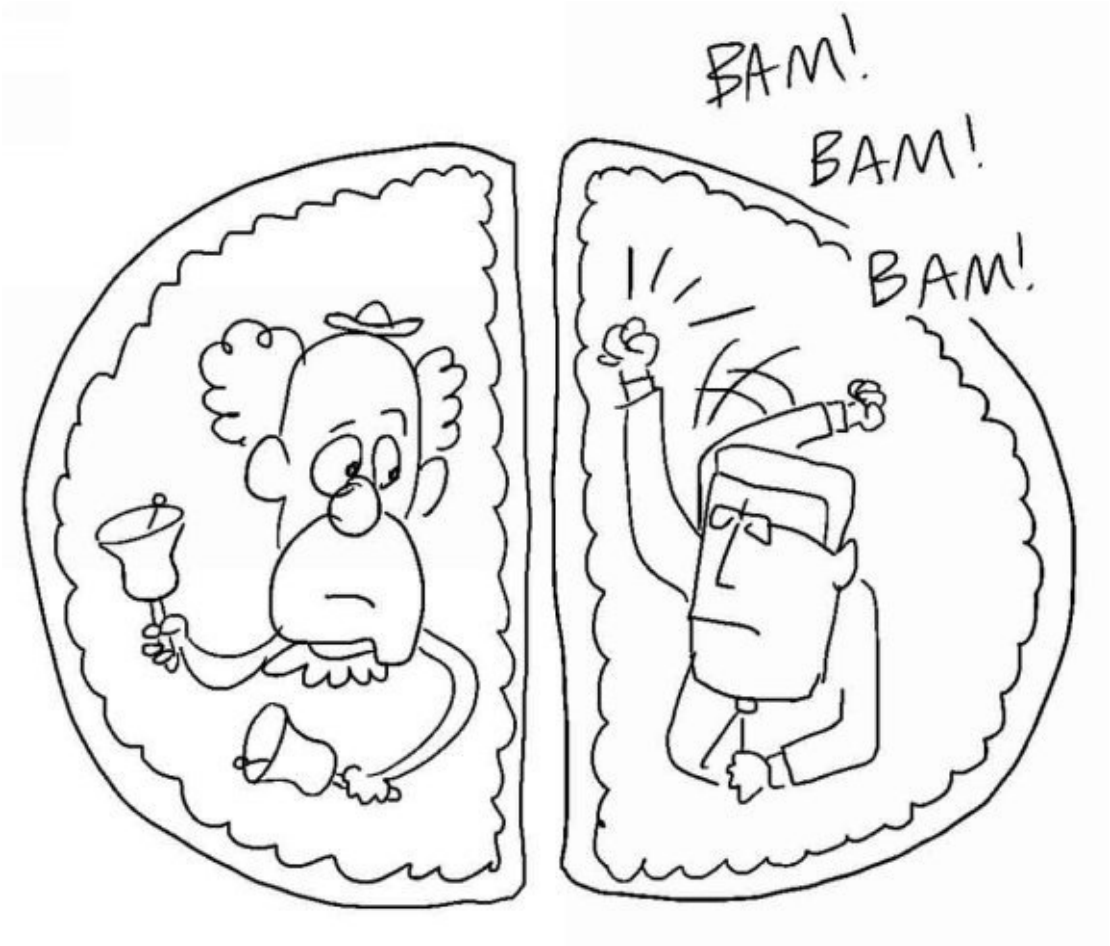
There's that Editor brain again! But in this case, spotting a cliché might be helpful. It makes me realize that if we go with Irony, the cliché will be inverted, and therefore potentially a fresh take on this type of character.

(As you write more, you eventually want your brain to be able to switch between Clown and Editor fluidly. If you're just learning how to write humor, it's probably best to stay focused in Clown mode so that you don't derail any progress by coming down too hard on your ideas.)

Anyway, let's go the other way with the bus driver and make him nice. This simple bus-driver character could be a one-liner on his own.

> There was something seriously wrong with my bus driver today. He was nice.

We lost our original Subtext there, but that's okay. It happens all the time—Subtext can get you started on an idea, but it doesn't mean you have to finish with the same Subtext. All that really matters is that you explore ideas and try to generate new ones that amuse you. When that happens, you might tap into a different Subtext, which can be just as worthy as the original, since you thought of it. In this case, our new Subtext is, "I'm always suspicious when a bus driver is very nice." It could be argued that this Subtext is not irreducible. It uses Irony. So, it's really more of a joke. The Subtext is still "bus drivers are mean."



Is there an Analogy to be made here? Bus drivers are often sort of camped out in their driver's seats, since they're sitting there all day. What is that like? A homeless person camped out on a slab of cardboard on the street? Homeless people ask for change and so do bus drivers, so maybe there's something there.

> Bus driver making smooth transition to homeless street dweller.
>
> I go by this guy every day who's camped out and asking for change. Then I pay my fare and take my seat.

Yikes. That's awful.

There's a big attack from the Editor brain!

This is the kind of Editor-brain attack that can destroy the confidence of a beginning writer. "Yikes, that's awful!" can quickly turn to, "I'm no good!" and then, "I'll never be a comedy writer!" And that's not the kind of internal dialog you want to be having. Remember that all comedy writers write bad jokes, and forge on.

Maybe that joke is awful, but there might still be something to work with there. For now, though, let's take that helpful hint from the Editor brain for what it's worth, and move onto another Funny Filter. How about Shock? As soon as I thought of Shock, an idea popped into my mind:

> When two porn-bus drivers pass each other on their routes, they customarily give each other a handjob.

This might work, but it could involve two impossible things. The inherent Reference in the Subtext, which might not be very well known, and the zany idea of a porn-bus are the two impossible things. But it's making some small part of my brain giggle, so I'll put it on my short list. It has Reference (inherent in the Subtext), Shock, Character, and Hyperbole (since I've exaggerated my Subtext to an impossible extreme—they can't give handjobs when driving by each other). So, it seems worthy at least of holding onto.

The final step of Method 1 is to let ideas sit for a while, then come back and assess them later. At that point, you'll then be using Method 2.

METHOD 2: FINESSING

Getting hit with inspiration and having a funny joke pop into your mind is great when it happens (which is why you must capture it in your notebook when it does), but it can't be relied on as a production method. You may not get such a lightening bolt for weeks at a stretch, so you need to be able to generate material using the other two methods as well.

If your notebook or Morning Pages does in fact contain some gems that are striking you as pretty funny jokes all by themselves, then count yourself lucky. Now you can use Method 2: Finessing to polish or punch-up the joke if necessary.

The other occasion when you'd use Method 2 is if you worked on some jokes using Method 1 a few days ago, and now you're pulling out your shortlist from a few days ago to finesse them. With this method, you need only assess your funny idea, and perhaps improve it by making sure it's clean, the contrast is heightened as much as it can be, and it doesn't have any logistics, spelling or grammatical errors. You also want to make sure you're clear what the Subtext is so you don't fundamentally alter what made this joke work for you in the first place. With this method, it's perilously easy to rework your joke into oblivion.

The first goal of this method is to simply make sure your joke makes sense, and is given the best chance to succeed. Make sure you know what joke you're

telling, and your reader knows what joke you're telling (Humor-Writing Tip #8). The second goal is to make sure it's structured to be as funny as it can be.

You're going to be in Editor brain this time.

I looked through my notebook and found a couple of these. Let's go through the process of Finessing those.

> A killer ads a touch of class to his basement torture chamber with simulated wood grain.

First, let's get square on what joke we're telling—this will better help us finesse it. What is this joke saying? In other words, what is the Subtext? Is it about a killer or his dungeon? No, it's a savage take down of simulated wood grain, which looks awful and is the opposite of classy. The killer and his use of it is just a tool to communicate that Subtext. I'm going as far away as I can from the idea of classy or pleasant or attractive home decor in order to say what I need to say about simulated wood grain.

I find it fun to deconstruct a joke after having written it, to get a peek at what was going on in my mind, which I was probably not aware of at the time.

So, I want to make sure the wood grain is clearly mocked. It might need more description, like "tiles," just to make sure the image is planted. I could cut some words if this is a headline.

> Basement torture chamber classed up with simulated wood-grain tile.

It's even tighter with "tile" over "tiles." Yes, that kind of attention to detail matters. We want jokes to be as tightly worded as possible.

If it's a one-liner, we could ascribe it to me or the killer character, but we might be better off concealing him more, and rearrange it so the funny part comes last, which is almost always a good idea:

> Bachelor Tip: simulated wood-grain tile can class up your basement torture chamber.

So now I've hidden some of the details a bit more, to let the reader better add two and two. Changing the voice from a headline to a direct call to action breaks it up and makes it a little more distinct from a lot of one-liners you here, too.

This one-liner has Shock, with the moderate serial-killer reference. It has Parody, in that it's a spoof of a helpful household tip you might see on a website like askmen.com or its ilk. It has Irony, in that having classy decor is pretty

much the opposite of having a torture chamber.

This one is sitting pretty well with me, and I'll definitely add it to the short list.

Humor-Writing Tip #16: Keep It Simple

Don't try to overload a joke with too much exposition, information or too confusing a rubric for your audience to get through. Just use a Funny Filter to give a twist to your one subtextual message, and state it in the clearest, simplest way possible. Anything more and you're probably only going to confuse readers.

Another example:

Let's say we look at a shortlist from a few days ago and find the joke "Dying Pen's Last Words Unintelligible."

This sounds like an *Onion* headline to me, and seems amusing enough. Let's figure out why.

Sense of Humor

Every writer has comedy preferences and proclivities. You may prefer the humor from the Reference Funny Filter most of all, and have an easy time writing jokes using Reference. You may find Metahumor difficult, because you just don't think that way, or don't find that kind of humor very inspiring.

Some Funny Filters will come more naturally to you, and others will be a struggle. Feel free to play to your strengths as much as you like. That's what gives you your unique voice and sense of humor. But I urge you to practice using all of the Funny Filters, especially the ones you find most challenging.

When you condition your comedy-writing muscle to be able to write any kind of joke using any kind of Funny Filter, you increase your potential readership. Readers are no different from you. Each one of them has preferences for certain Funny Filters, too. So, when you use as many of the Funny Filters as possible in your writing, you'll blanket your potential audience, entertaining the greatest number of readers.

It's using Analogy, comparing a dying pen to a dying person. Even at its very tight five words, it's making at least one connection point in that Analogy (people have last words, pen's don't). It's also using Character, personifying the pen and giving it one trait: it's dying. It's using Madcap, too, since a sentient pen is an inherently zany idea. Another Funny Filter I'm seeing is Reference. Actually, two instances of Reference: a dying pen, which we've all experienced, and a dying person, more specifically the cliché of a dying person in a movie or on a TV show when dramatic stakes hang on their last words. Finally, I'm seeing Irony. Unlike those movie and TV characters, a pen's last words usually end with far less drama. The pen's last words can't be seen, and the owner gets mildly frustrated and chucks the pen in the garbage.

So, there's a lot going on there. But what is the joke saying? Is there any Subtext? On its face, it doesn't seem like it. It's just a silly joke about a dying pen.

But when there's a Reference involved, there's usually some Subtext. The Reference here is the experience of having a pen die. What opinion is this joke expressing about that? Or is it simply referring to it? I think it's saying that even though the death of a pen is an anticlimactic event, it's still frustrating. The inability of the pen, and by extension the pen owner, to express their "dying words" is, on some personal level—at least to the pen owner—just as frustrating as it is on a TV show when the detective can't wrench a vital clue from a dying suspect. This comparison has heightened contrast because the two are at extreme ends of the drama spectrum.

That's what I'm getting from this joke. It's not Earth-shaking Subtext, but it's enough!

So, the joke is obviously already very concise. My one concern is that the contrast isn't heightened quite as much as it could be. A pen dying and a character dying on a TV detective drama have contrast, but they're not polar opposites. Let's try to get there with a few different attempts.

> Pen's fateful last words unintelligible

The word "fateful" is turning up the contrast a bit. But it's still not a polar opposite.

> Alas, I couldn't understand the fateful last words of my dying pen

We've put the funny part last now, which introduced some nice misdirection. But the biggest problem I'm having with this road we're on is that we're making the joke longer, which may not be the best thing for it.

What I might do is put all of these on another short list and look at them again later, or maybe tweet one of them and see what happens.

Ideally, before showing my work to an audience, I get feedback from some trusted peers. There's an involved process I use for vetting peers and ensuring that their advice is useful, but that, too, is a subject for another book.

METHOD 3: DIVINING

When you have no notes, or nothing in your notes that appeals to you, use the Divining method by starting with the Funny Filters and then forcing some jokes

out. We're going to make a list of at least 10 one-liners (one for each Funny Filter) using this method.

We're in Clown mode again.

First, pick a Funny Filter. You can pick any one you want, but I'll just go through each one as listed in this book.

Irony:

Think of things that are opposites:

- Night and day
- Dark and light
- Big and small
- Old and young

Now let's see if we can drum up any opinions about those things. I like night. It's exciting and filled with energy. By the same token, it's very relaxing to sleep then. There's some Irony. There might be a joke there:

> I love the nighttime. I go out to clubs and get a good night's sleep there.

Onto Character.

Think of some characters you know, or who are popular in the culture at large, and reduce them to 1-3 simple traits:

- The Queen mother. Her single trait: She waves.
- Jared Leto. He has two traits: 1. He's an extremely dedicated actor who alters his body in extreme ways for roles, and 2. He looks young.
- An astronaut. One or two traits: Astronauts always seem very flat and scientific when they speak—they're never excited or passionate.
- Your Dad. One or two traits: He does whatever your mom says (or whatever your case may be).

Now we need to make these characters act on their traits, which is how jokes are made with this Funny Filter. So, maybe Jared Leto can act on both traits at the same time:

> Jared Leto is aging in reverse to prepare for a role as a zygote in his next film.

Zygote is a funny word (Madcap), so Character, Madcap and Hyperbole are in

evidence there.

Next is Shock. Shock is easy. We just have to be shocking. But let's try to be careful to observe the guidelines and keep the shocking aspects of our ideas mild, and let's also try to have some kind of Subtext.

What's shocking? Let's make a list.

- Murder
- Racism
- People being burned alive
- Rape
- Genocide
- The guillotine
- Tearing out someone's heart and eating it raw, like a savage

Structuring One-Liners And Jokes

The way you arrange a bunch of words can determine whether it gets a laugh or a yawn. It's wise to avoid clichéd structures like "shave and a haircut," or "da-da da, da-da DA!," the ol' one-two punch, or any number of other standard joke-structure patterns that are equally difficult to describe in print.

The best jokes have an even tempo that sounds natural, without too much emphasis on any one part. If you overplay the part you think is funniest, you risk over-emphasized it and coming off as desperate or old-fashioned (or Borscht Belt).

For example, one of the tips in this book is "Put the Funny Part Last." But in the Jared Leto joke I wrote earlier, I avoided putting the funny word dead least, because it would have reorganized the sentence structure too much and given the word too much emphasis: Jared Leto is aging in reverse for a roll in his next film: a Zygote!" You almost don't need the exclamation point there, because you can feel it. And the colon serves as a kind of silent drum roll. Both of these things smack of old-school night-club comedy, which is all a big cliché now. Avoiding clichés is a rule that supersedes most others.

Do we have any opinions about any of these things? They're all pretty horrible, for starters. The tearing out of the heart strikes me as the most workable one of the bunch. It's mild because a lot of time has passed since the tragedy. It's something a Native American might have done hundreds of years ago. It's such a wildly inappropriate thing to do, it compels me to think of the opposite, to let Irony help out on this one:

A savage who tears out hearts and eats them raw is confirmed as the new U.S. Secretary of Defense

> President Nominates Gen. Herbert T. Klinesdale Secretary of Tearing Out Hearts and Eating Them Raw

That last one brings out some Subtext: that posts like Secretary of Defense, and the fact that we live in a world where war and conflict must awkwardly coexist with appropriate and civilized society, is strange and barbaric.

Next is Hyperbole. Hyperbole needs something to exaggerate, so we need to start with an opinion or some Subtext. So, what opinions do we have?

- Dessert is delicious
- Slides are fun
- Bunnies are cute
- Depressed people are no fun to talk to

Now, how can we exaggerate these ideas? We can take a dessert from that first one, and contrast it with something far larger:

> World United by Delicious Cake

Let’s move on to the next Funny Filter, Wordplay. Wordplay is a great Funny Filter to start from scratch with because when you find an interesting way to play with words, sometimes interesting Subtext can come about in unexpected ways. Think of some common words, or maybe words that might seem like they’d be fun to play with, then start goofing around with them to see if we can come up with anything.

- Bilbo Baggins
- The Reichstag
- Bumble bee
- Tumble-bum
- Tupperware
- Stink bomb
- Squirt gun
- BB gun
- Pellet gun

Now, are there words that sound like these words that could be swapped with them, or ways to contort these words into new words?

> Abominable Bumble Bee Haunts Local
> Bramble

A homemaker is in stable condition after an unexpected Tupperwarelanche

> There's a made-up word in that second one, but not much Subtext.

> Toys"R"Us has banned the sale of semi-autoloading squirt guns.

That enough attempts at Wordplay for now.

Reference is next. Here, we need to think of things that have happened in our lives, little moments that we think readers might be able to relate to.

Like, isn't it awful when you prepare a meal then drop the plate when you're heading to the table with it? ("Don't you hate it when..." is another good way to get yourself in the mode of thinking up a Reference joke.) Summer is better than winter because you don't have to put on and take off all those layers of coats, hat, boots, etc. They say nobody gets enough vitamin D from the sun anymore, but they also warn against sun exposure.

That's enough raw material. Let's try to come up with a way to express some of these by bringing to mind the Reference, letting the reader add two and two to come up with it on their own.

> Avoiding the sun yet getting enough Vitamin D are both important, so I drink 8 glasses of sunblock per day.

Next is Madcap. To get us started, some inherently funny things often used in Madcap are animals, funny hats, falling, goofy clown-horn sound, pants, chimps.

What do these things bring to mind? I like funny hats (that's where I go) and the pope has one of the funniest hats of all. It's such a great target because of the inherent Irony (he holds one of the most serious positions on Earth yet he wears the silliest hat) and Shock (making fun of religion). With Madcap, we already have three Funny Filters and we haven't even told the joke yet!

So, how can we make this situation even sillier?

> Pope breaks out matching conical gloves for winter

This one would be good with a picture showing the Pope wearing two-feet-tall, pointy (and impractical) gloves to match his hat. In that case, we could cut some words:

Pope breaks out matching winter gloves

After Madcap comes Parody. A good way to start with Parody when you're writing it is to think of the last thing you read, and try to parody that. The last thing I read was the order form from the photography company with my son's school pictures.

To parody that, the first thing that comes to mind for me is this form in the not-too-distant future, when child abductions are on the rise. Companies like this would send out order forms so you can select your child's milk-carton photo.

Super dark with some added Shock, but at least it has meaty Subtext.

We keep moving to Analogy, which we divine by come up with two disparate things that might have some similarities:

- A terrorist attack and a common household errand
- A gathering storm and an impending visit from unwanted company
- A parent and a god
- Santa Claus and God

Then take one of those ideas and split the two pieces apart. Lay one out clearly, but only allude to the other:

Suicide bomber had one other thing to do but can't remember what it was

To save humanity from sin, Santa sacrifices Chris Kringle, Jr.

For Misplaced Focus, we want to think of something unimportant that we can focus intently on at the exclusion of something else that's far more important. What are some things that are really big and important?

- The world ending
- An apocalypse
- A devastating flood
- The world exploding

Now, what are some very small things related to those big things? We're

looking for little, unimportant details surrounding them. For the world ending, there will be lava, plants will die, there will be no more episodes of our favorite TV show. What will come of the fashion industry? For the apocalypse, there are the Biblical details, like horsemen, the Antichrist (actually, he's probably to major a figure in that). How about

Joan Rivers and her daughter give a fashion play-by-play at world's end.

The apocalypse will be a boon for out-of-work horsemen

That first one is more of an idea for a sketch than a one-liner. But that's okay. We're in Clown mode, so everything is embraced.

Last one on the list is Metahumor. Let's shoot for type-B Metahumor and deconstruct something having to do with comedy:

Hilarious comedy show elicits laughter, cheers

And how about one more to try for a type A. Let's try starting out with an idiom having to do with humor or laughing.

- Laughter is the best medicine
- It only hurts when I laugh
- Laughter makes the world go around

(Actually that's love, I think)

Okay, let's try working with that last one and see what happens:

It only hurts when I laugh, so I don't laugh, which hurts.

Some word repetition in there adds a little Wordplay to that one.

With the Divining method, since we're solely in Clown-brain mode, it's always a good idea, if possible, to let new jokes sit for a few days so you can forget them, then look them over and assess them with a more objective eye (your Editor brain).

Chapter 7 Action Steps:

1. Write 10 one-liners or headlines or jokes using the Filtering method, going through Subtext and other non-joke observations you find in your notebook or

Morning Pages.

2. Go through your jokes from the Chapter 6 Action Step and run them through the Finessing process to make sure they're as good as they can be.

3. Write 10 one-liners using the Divining method, cycling through each of the 11 Funny Filters.

8: PROCESS OVERVIEW

Let's review the step-by-step process for how to generate funny ideas, and how to use this process to practice writing humor, and ultimately work toward producing high-quality humor, and doing so consistently.

All good humor writing starts with an opinion. A writer needs to have something to say. This opinion doesn't have to be funny, it just has to be something you have a feeling about. The humor writer generates this idea, and then is compelled to express it to readers. It can be an opinion about how it's no fun getting old, how chores are annoying, or something more sophisticated, like the idea that the whole human condition is a farce.

Usually, an opinion suitable for good Subtext comes in the form of a simple sentence: noun, verb, object. It must be an irreducible thought, which has no Subtext or hidden meaning of its own. It must be a flat, "on the nose" opinion.

This opinion, whether sophisticated, dark, uplifting or just small and silly, is the essential spark needed to create humor. The more astute and original your opinion, the better your humor writing is going to be. If your opinion is trite or contrived or, worst of all, a cliché, your humor writing is not going to be very good.

You can start with this opinion, or you can start with an attempt at a joke, and worry about finding and finessing the opinion out of it afterwards. Either way works.

There are two primary ways to generate the opinions you need to write about. The first is to be struck by the lightening bolt of inspiration. This method is highly unreliable, so it's a good idea to keep a little notebook and pen with you at all times in order to capture those precious thoughts whenever they hit.

The other method is to sit in front of a computer or pad of paper and just start writing. Write continuously and without judgment for a half an hour every day. As you write, try to gently nudge your thoughts toward what amuses you. This is how you grease the wheels of your mind and churn up all sorts of humorous ideas and opinions that you didn't even know you had.

Humor-Writing Tip #18: Ruffle Some Feathers

In Satire, if someone's not offended, you're probably not doing it right. The best humor has a little sense of danger, or mischievousness, as if the writer is getting away with saying something that shouldn't be allowed. Often this is at the expense of a humorless authority or comfortable target. When a target gets angry at something you wrote, as long as they're a deserving target, consider

that a badge of honor and a sign of success.

These two activities develop The Clown side of your brain. The Clown is the right side of the brain—the foolish, unrestrained, confident and prolific part of your brain where all your funny ideas come from. By carrying a notebook to write down inspired thoughts and by continuing to do the Morning Pages exercise, you prime the pump of your creativity until it is overflowing.

All good humor writers experience this sense of idea-overflow, and as a result feel compelled to get it out through writing. It's something they have to do, or they'll burst. Developing the Clown side of the brain is how you can generate this compulsion in yourself. It's relatively easy, but can take a few days or even weeks to see results from the Morning Pages.

The prolific and successful humor writer needs to develop not just the Clown side of the brain, but the Editor side as well. The Editor represents the left side of the brain, the logical, critical, and organized side. This side of the brain needs to be conditioned to sculpt humor by evaluating ideas based on the criteria laid out in this book. Does it have too many words? Is it a cliché? Is it comforting the comforted? These questions need to be answered, and any joke that doesn't meet the criteria for good humor needs to be either finessed or scrapped.

It will take some time for you to get confident using this process. The best way to master it is to practice it regularly. Here is a suggested schedule for that practice:

Every day, write in your notebook when an idea strikes you, and force yourself to do the Morning Pages exercise.

Once or twice a week, go through your notebook of ideas and your daily Morning Pages. If you see anything remotely interesting or potentially funny in there, take it out and put in on a short list. For most writers, only a single-digit percentile of what they write will make it onto this short list. That's fine. Some weeks you may have more, and some weeks you may have less. That's fine, too. Just remember that the more material you generate, no matter how good it is, the more you'll have to work with. And that's all that matters at this stage.

However, if you find you're consistently finding nothing interesting or amusing in all of your raw material, you're probably being overly critical of your work (relying too heavily on the Editor side of your brain), and it might be a good idea to get a second opinion, try to lower your standards, or go back to the drawing board and do more Clown cultivation. You might also try putting your work it in front of readers, no matter how good or bad you think it is. No matter what happens, you'll probably learn something about your work that could help you improve.

There are generally two kinds of ideas that make it onto your short list: (1) Funny observations or opinions, and (2) unfunny observations or opinions. Each kind of idea is valuable. The former is clay you can shape into a joke. The latter is ore from which quality humor can be mined.

As you reshape and create jokes, your Subtext may change. That's okay. As long as your Subtext is saying something that you can stand behind, you're doing well. And if it's making you laugh, then you're in great shape.

Unfunny opinions can be extremely useful to the humor writer. They represent how you feel about a given subject, which is potential Subtext for humor. You can turn these ideas into funny writing by filtering them through one or more of the Funny Filters.

The Funny Filters filter or process your ideas so readers can't taste your bitter, raw opinion. You want your reader to experience only the sweet refined humor. Ideally, you want them to do this by discovering your Subtext subliminally. It's like feeding an aspirin to a child. You don't give the child a plain, dry, bitter pill to swallow. You crunch it up and put it in a spoonful of jelly. This is how Subtext works.

If readers wanted unrefined opinion, they would read the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*. They're reading your work because they want to read something funny. So, you need to hide your Subtext in a spoonful of humor. This is what the Funny Filters do for you.

Spend a few minutes every day trying to write humor. Do this by one of three methods: Filtering, Finessing and Divining.

In Filtering, you experiment with your Subtext by running it through each of the 11 Funny Filters. See if anything funny happens to it when it's looked at in the differently shaped funhouse mirror each Funny Filter provides. If something funny happens, add that idea to your short list of potential jokes. If nothing particularly funny happens, you're either being too critical again, or maybe your Subtext isn't elemental enough or astute enough.

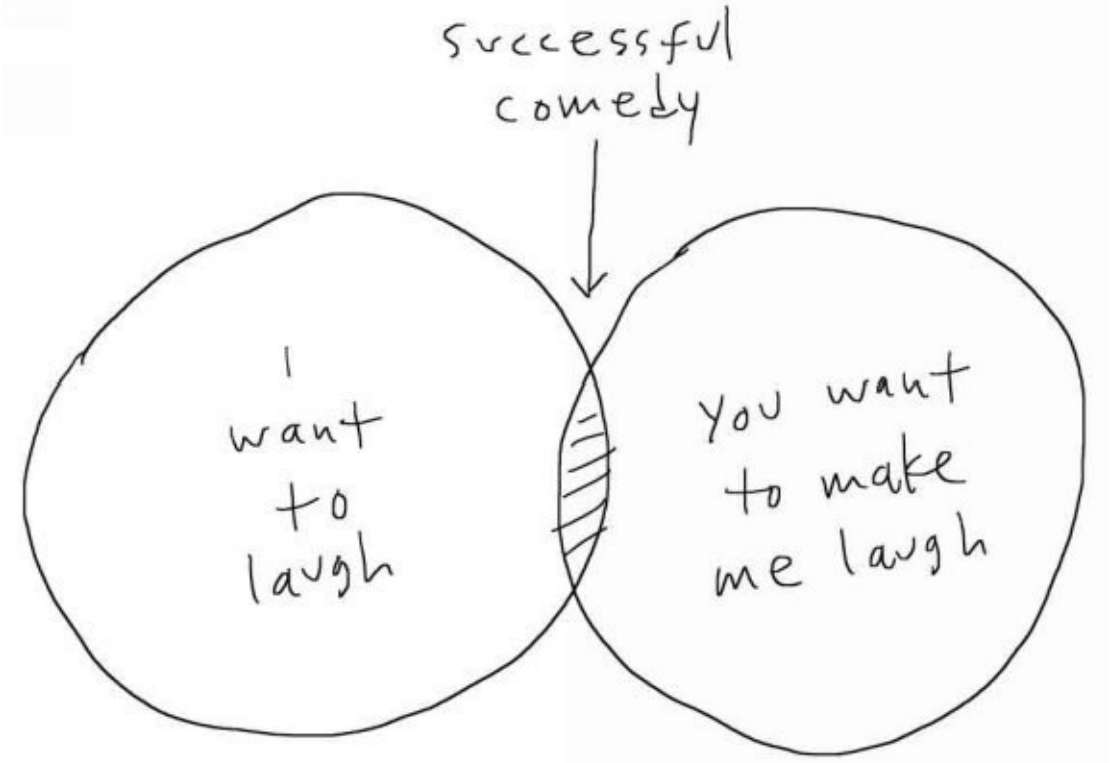
The 11 Funny Filters represent the only 11 things that will work to reliably generate laughs in comedy. If you're working with good Subtext, one of the Funny Filters will work to make your Subtext funny. Go through them again and make sure you're using each one properly.

If you don't have any Subtext but instead have a funny observation or funny line or joke that you've written, use the Finessing method. Now you're not looking so much at Subtext as you're trying to maximize the laugh potential of the joke. Go through all 17 of the Humor Writing Tips in this book and assess your joke.

Does it conform to all the guidelines outlined in those tips? Is it a cliché?

Could the contrast be heightened? Could you rearrange it so it has a better, less clichéd structure, or so that the funny part comes last?

What's the target? If the target is good (it must comfort the afflicted or afflict the comfortable), or if it's edgy because it gets tantalizingly close to the wrong target, move on to asking yourself what Funny Filters are being used. It's very important that you know what joke you're telling, and how you're telling it. You need to be aware of what you're communicating and how you're making it funny for the reader. Only then can you have the kind of control you need to maximize the experience for your reader and get the biggest laugh possible.



Ask yourself, Could this joke make use of more Funny Filters? Could you layer them? Go through each Funny Filter and see if there's a way to incorporate some element of each without adversely affecting your joke, and certainly without adding words. Most won't fit, but you might get lucky with a garnish. A slight pinch of Shock or Madcap almost always makes a joke better. And with some work, some sophisticated Wordplay could probably be applied. Could a character be involved? Could you change the format and turn it into Parody?

When you've beefed the joke up as much as you can, ask yourself, can any words be cut? Proof it, and make sure it's spelled right and makes grammatical sense.

If you have no notes or jokes of any kind, use the Divining method, and go through each of the 11 Funny Filters and brainstorm jokes using each filter's

inherent funniness.

After a few weeks of this, you've probably got yourself a few good jokes. Sift through the best jokes on your short list and decide what to do with them. For what media is each idea is best suited? Do you have small ideas, suitable for no more than a tweet or one-liner? Do you have bigger ideas—ones that could sustain a short story? Maybe it's even worthy of a comic novel or screenplay?

Whatever the case, now it's time to get your work in front of readers, and find out what they think of it.

And whatever you do, don't fall in love with that one idea and stop generating new ones. Writers write, and successful writers continue to write, and continue to develop new ideas.

Continuing to write on a regular basis, adjusting your approach, getting reader feedback and then incorporating that newfound wisdom into your next piece of writing—in conjunction with all the tools we covered in this book—is the blueprint for becoming a great, funny writer.

CHAPTER 8 ACTION STEP:
Keep writing, and practice these techniques until you're Tina Fey.

– – –

This book covers the elemental process of conceiving and writing a joke, the fundamental skill you need to be a successful comedy writer. It's important to start at this level. Even for the accomplished professional, focusing on the fundamentals is the key to mastery. Once you can churn out good jokes competently and consistently, you're ready to move onto writing comedy articles and stories. The art and craft of writing short humor pieces is the subject of the second book in this series, How to Write Funnier.

For more, enroll in the four-level writing program ("Writing with The Onion") that I developed at The Second City Training Center in Chicago. This book encompasses what we learn in level one, "Basic Writing with The Onion." For class schedules, go to www.secondcity.com/training